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## Scattered Supremacies: Locating Whiteness In Modernist Fiction

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# Scattered Supremacies: Locating Whiteness In Modernist Fiction

## Abstract

Intervening in modernist literary studies and critical whiteness studies, this dissertation argues that modernist novels featuring largely white casts of characters and few themes or plotlines of overtly racial content are key sites for understanding how white people manifest their racial identities in subtle, indirect, and often unwitting ways. While it is taken for granted that race is a key factor in texts by writers of color, critics still tend to consider the racial dynamics of texts by white writers only when they involve primitivism, Orientalism, or scenes of interracial violence. This narrow framework exempts large swathes of white literary production from racial analysis simply because they do not feature overt racism or overtly racist representational forms. Through readings of novels by Jean Rhys, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Willa Cather, "Scattered Supremacies" uncovers forms of white supremacy more subtle and oblique than either white people's stigmatizations of people of color or overt proclamations of white racial superiority. I focus on novels that feature little to no interracial conflict between white and nonwhite people, novels where white characters are not consciously thinking about their own whiteness. Within these texts, I argue, whiteness emerges out of conflicts between different classes of white people trying to distinguish themselves from other whites. These intra-racial class conflicts involve moralistic identification with a range of economically coded and thus seemingly race-neutral virtues, such as hard work, independence, discipline, and the austere capacity to endure hardship. In clinging to a sense of themselves as embodying these virtues, white characters and their white authors are constantly managing the boundaries and connotations of whiteness, even if they are not consciously doing so and even if the people disparaged for lacking these virtues are other whites. The stakes of being able to recognize the kinds of economically coded racial discourse identified in these texts are especially high, for claims about the possession or lack of classically liberal, seemingly "race-neutral" virtues like industriousness, discipline, and self-reliance are an increasingly crucial part of how white supremacy is perpetuated under "colorblind" neoliberalism.

## Degree Type

Dissertation

## Degree Name

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

## Graduate Group

English

## First Advisor

Jed Esty

## Keywords

colorblindness, modernism, neoliberalism, race, whiteness

SCATTERED SUPREMACIES: LOCATING WHITENESS IN MODERNIST FICTION

Micah Del Rosario

A DISSERTATION

in

English

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2020

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*To my grandparents, Clarence and Loretta Ku and Ramon and Helen Del Rosario*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grad school was a long road, a rewarding but often painful one, particularly for someone who was never sure about his fit within academia. “Scattered Supremacies” would not have been completed were it not for a host of people who, consciously or not, served as a support system in my most fatigued, depressed, and self-doubting hours.

I am grateful, first, to the many graduate students in the Penn English community who gave me advice, company, laughter, and camaraderie for the past seven years. Izzy Lockhart and Mark Firmani were invaluable friends and confidants throughout the final stretch of this PhD experience. Their intellectual stimulation and emotional support helped me survive grad-school burnout, and I can only hope that I’ve been as good a friend to them as they’ve been to me. Of course, there are countless other past and present Penn English grad students whose friendship and wisdom were key to my mental health and scholarship: Daniel Davies, Evelyn Soto, Riley McGuire, Natalie Amleshi, Eleni Palis, Sam Waterman, Jess Shollenberger, Elias Rodriques, Melanie Abeygunawardana, Ava Kim, Shona Adler, Kirsten Lee, Davy Knittle, Zach Fruit, Keyana Parks, Mariah Min, Howie Tam, Brooke Stanley, Alex Eisenthal, Orchid Tierney, Alex Millen, Aaron Bartels-Swindells, Jazmín Delgado, Mayelin Perez, Martin Premoli, Matty Hemming, Najnin Islam, and Clare Mullaney. A special shout out to my mentor, Travis Chi Wing Lau (hey, girl).

The idea for this dissertation came to me out of my own experience. Its originality I claim as a product of my own background and interests, but it would never have attained the rigor and robustness it did without the brilliant insights and caring mentorship of Penn English faculty. I owe more than I can express to my stellar

dissertation committee, Jed Esty, Heather Love, Paul Saint-Amour, and Ania Loomba, who lifted me up and challenged me from the time of my third-year field exams all the way to the finish line. Heather Love brought a combination of rigor, warmth and understanding, and pragmatically targeted and prioritized feedback that was always immensely helpful. I am convinced that Paul Saint-Amour is the most calming person I will ever meet. He helped me navigate myriad intellectual, professional, and bureaucratic mazes over the past seven years and played a key role in both of the publications I produced during grad school. This dissertation really got off the ground with the chapter on Rhys, and Ania Loomba's incisive feedback made that chapter what it is. She is one of the fiercest intellects I have ever met, and this dissertation handles questions of race, class, gender, and intersectionality with a nuance and complexity that owes much to her brilliant mind. Jed Esty was the best advisor I could ever have hoped for. His ability to see the big picture in terms of concepts, arguments, and interventions constantly pushed this project to more ambitious, self-aware heights. He tirelessly shepherded me through the end stages of dissertation life, buoying me up in my exhaustion, accepting and working within my limitations, and giving me roadmaps and encouragement to finish and defend a dissertation in the midst of an unprecedented global pandemic. Perhaps more than anything, I am grateful for the positivity with which he received and supported my decision not to pursue an academic career (an encouragement that all of my committee provided) and the lengths to which he then went to help me apply for and land a teaching job outside the tenure track.

Aside from these four amazing scholars and mentors, I was supported intellectually and emotionally by numerous other Penn English faculty. Jim English

offered helpful comments on this dissertation in meetings of the Mods Reading Group, and though playing less of a direct role in my dissertation, many faculty contributed to other areas of my grad-school life in ways that helped me juggle commitments and free up time and energy for dissertation writing. Jo Park was an immensely knowledgeable and generous mentor for me as a teacher. Dagmawi Woubshet was a godsend during the trials of the academic job market. Melissa Sanchez, Margo Crawford, Pearl Brilmyer, Suvir Kaul, Rahul Mukherjee, and Simone White gave me many enjoyable chats in the hallways, sometimes helping me to think about scholarly questions, other times helping to take them off my mind. I would be remiss not to thank Jennifer Egan for the interest she took in me after I TAed for her course when she was an Artist-in-Residence at Penn. Her tireless advocacy of my teaching and her willingness to serve as a reference and letter writer for a professionally lost and nervous soul was a crucial part of how I ended up with a job after grad school, despite a coronavirus-induced economic recession.

I am immensely grateful to the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation for a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Dissertation Grant that funded an entire year of work on this project. I also thank the Social Science Research Council for a Mellon-SSRC Graduate Studies Enhancement Grant that likewise provided funds supporting this research. I also thank, of course, the University of Pennsylvania for five years of Benjamin Franklin/Fontaine Fellowships and for the resource-rich, intellectual climate that facilitated this dissertation.

It's been a long time since my undergraduate years at Cornell, but I would not have become a PhD student (or been accepted to Penn) without the teaching and mentorship of many Cornell English faculty, some of whom are still there, others not. My

retrospective thanks to Stuart Davis, Daniel Schwarz, Kate McCullough, Jeremy Braddock, Paul Fleming, and (again) Margo Crawford (before her move to Penn).

There are so many people who helped me through grad school without knowing they were doing it, non-English-PhD friends in Philadelphia, from Cornell, and back home in Hawaii whose companionship, memory, and spirit gave me joy in trying times. Abby and Eloise Squire were an endless source of positivity. I am grateful to Pax Ressler and John Jarboe for playing board games and video games with me in the idle hours and providing company that allowed me to escape academia while retaining a political consciousness and cultural fluency that continued to challenge and stimulate me. Julia Cao has always been in my corner, looking out for me from freshman year at Cornell to the present. Jackson Randolph, Ranjay Krishna, Ben Liu, Can Akçevin, and Ray Wang gave me Zoom hangouts that recharged my batteries, and Hia Woollard was a constant source of encouragement during the final year of my program. To the Punaluu gang—Cody Black, Nohea Hoopii, Ryan Olaguera, Megan Lum, Lauren Kim, Keola Tan, Kaipo Kekaula, Megan Araujo, and Josh Koko—I ran to your existence, to memories of you, of us, more than you can know. I don't think anyone who hasn't written a dissertation can understand how fundamental it is to a graduate student's mental health to know and have access to a world outside of academia, one that provincializes the profession and keeps it in perspective. I am five thousand miles from Hawaii, but even from Philadelphia, I could always see the lighthouse, and thoughts of you all, keeping the home fires burning, kept me afloat at sea.

I shudder to think what the past few years would have been like without Justin Yoder, and given that my feelings, over the past few sentences, have whisked me out of



proper, third-person address anyway, I'll just apostrophize to "you" and roll with it. You've saved me from myself, my dear, more than I care to admit. You've forced me, intentionally or not, to confront insecurities and habits that have been painful yet necessary to address, and I've grown as much in the three and a half years since I met you as I did in the 25 years before that. As Baldwin once put it, "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within." You make me laugh and tell me I'm incredible and keep me from feeling alone; that's why I like you. But your circumspection, level-headedness, and self-awareness also challenge me to be more honest with myself and help me to identify the parts of my character that need improvement; that's why I love you and why I want to build a life around you.

Lastly and most of all, I am indebted to the support of my family: my mother and father, Desiree and Thomas Del Rosario; my grandma and grandpa, Loretta and Clarence Ku; and my uncle, aunt, and cousin, Brian, Vicki, and Peyton. They have guided me morally, recharged me emotionally, assisted me financially, and (my mother, grandma, and father, especially) shown a forgiveness toward my aloofness that does not go unappreciated. I have not always been the most affectionate or communicative son and grandson. I was an only child who needed space, and I am trying to be better, but in the meantime, I hope that this crowning academic achievement, of which I know they are all very proud, feels like an accomplishment at least somewhat worth their years of loving patience. This dissertation is dedicated to my four grandparents, for the many sacrifices I know they made and the many others of which I'm ignorant. Mom and dad, I promise my next major accomplishment will be dedicated to you.

A final thanks, too, to the islands and people of Hawaii, without whom this dissertation would not exist. Thank you, first, to Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop, for the singular education that propelled me here. As we say on the hill: “Forever indebted to her.” Hawaii, moreover, is perhaps the only place in the United States where an Asian and Pacific Islander can grow up not feeling like a racial minority—not ever being made conscious of his racialized body in a painful, traumatizing way. If it weren’t for that geographically unique (and highly classed) experience of his own racial identity, this Filipino Hawaiian may never have been drawn to whiteness as an object of ambivalent identification and research.

## ABSTRACT

### SCATTERED SUPREMACIES: LOCATING WHITENESS IN MODERNIST FICTION

Micah Del Rosario

Jed Esty

Intervening in modernist literary studies and critical whiteness studies, this dissertation argues that modernist novels featuring largely white casts of characters and few themes or plotlines of overtly racial content are key sites for understanding how white people manifest their racial identities in subtle, indirect, and often unwitting ways. While it is taken for granted that race is a key factor in texts by writers of color, critics still tend to consider the racial dynamics of texts by white writers only when they involve primitivism, Orientalism, or scenes of interracial violence. This narrow framework exempts large swathes of white literary production from racial analysis simply because they do not feature overt racism or overtly racist representational forms. Through readings of novels by Jean Rhys, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Willa Cather, “Scattered Supremacies” uncovers forms of white supremacy more subtle and oblique than either white people’s stigmatizations of people of color or overt proclamations of white racial superiority. I focus on novels that feature little to no interracial conflict between white and nonwhite people, novels where white characters are not consciously thinking about their own whiteness. Within these texts, I argue, whiteness emerges out of conflicts between different classes of white people trying to *distinguish* themselves from other whites. These intra-racial class conflicts involve moralistic identification with a range of economically coded and thus seemingly race-neutral virtues, such as hard work,

independence, discipline, and the austere capacity to endure hardship. In clinging to a sense of themselves as embodying these virtues, white characters and their white authors are constantly managing the boundaries and connotations of whiteness, even if they are not consciously doing so and even if the people disparaged for lacking these virtues are other whites. The stakes of being able to recognize the kinds of economically coded racial discourse identified in these texts are especially high, for claims about the possession or lack of classically liberal, seemingly “race-neutral” virtues like industriousness, discipline, and self-reliance are an increasingly crucial part of how white supremacy is perpetuated under “colorblind” neoliberalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Whiteness and the Modernist Imagination: Literary Studies and the Location of Race**

In 1934, during a period of crushing financial and marital strife, F. Scott Fitzgerald published his fourth and final novel called *Tender is the Night*. It tells the story of the rise and fall of Doctor Richard “Dick” Diver, a promising young psychologist who marries one of his rich patients and gradually loses his work ethic and professional standing by travelling too much in her leisure-class social circles. The novel is in many ways a self-critical (and self-pitying) portrait of Fitzgerald’s own marital and career trajectory, which likewise began with immense professional promise and an extravagant lifestyle during the Jazz Age but devolved into financial scrimping by the Great Depression compounded by a marriage heavily strained by his wife Zelda’s institutionalization for schizophrenia.

Over the course of the novel, Fitzgerald signals his protagonist’s decline as well as the decline of many of his friends through an increasing number of social or romantic entanglements with a variety of nonwhite characters. Abe North, an American musician and friend of the Divers vacationing with them in France, prefigures Dick’s fall as he becomes resigned to a life of parties and drinking and loses his resolve to return to America and continue his career. Abe’s downward spiral is most starkly symptomatized when his alcoholism implicates him in an embarrassing racial scandal. While drunk in Montparnasse, he accuses an African-American bar patron of stealing his money, which leads to a bloody scuffle not so much between Abe and the man he accused but between the man he accused and another black man, named Jules Peterson, whom Abe had

enlisted as a legal witness to the charges he placed with the police. The whole fiasco culminates with the accused man and a few of his friends following Abe and Peterson to Dick's hotel room, where Peterson is soon found dead on the bedspread a few minutes after Dick and Abe leave him unattended. After Abe meets an undignified end being beaten to death in a bar fight, his widow Mary remarries to a rich Italian count, the owner of large mineral deposits in southwestern Asia. But, we are told, "'Conte di Minghetti,'" the name of Mary's new husband, "was merely a papal title" stemming from his wealth (Fitzgerald, *Tender* 258). The man's real name is Hosain, and he is not Italian so much as one "of the Kyble-Berber-Sabaeen-Hindu strain that belts across north Africa and Asia," a man "not quite light enough to travel in a pullman south of the Mason-Dixon" (259, 258). Finally, as Dick's own decline progresses throughout the novel, his wife Nicole's disaffection with him is accompanied by her growing infatuation with a French-American soldier named Tommy Barban. While Tommy, as far as we know, is of fully European descent, traveling and fighting in distant wars has left him "dark, scarred and handsome," and Nicole is erotically thrilled by his complexion colored "by unknown suns, his nourishment by strange soils, [and] his tongue awkward with the curl of many dialects" (294, 269). The language and imagery used to describe Tommy and Nicole's romance is explicitly Orientalist: "Symbolically she lay across his saddle-bow as surely as he had wolfed her away from Damascus and they had come out upon the Mongolian plain" (297-298).

Critical discussions of race in *Tender is the Night* have focused almost entirely on this set of characters, tropes, and plot lines. They have been read as reflecting Fitzgerald's reactionary phobias about the breakdown of social distinctions and

hierarchies in the wake of the Jazz Age's decadent moral climate. As Felipe Smith has pointed out, Fitzgerald's biographical and fictional obsession with upward mobility and social climbing required inequality as a baseline reality: he was "troubled by trends which blurred the old lines of social distinction" because "his fantasies of social conquest ... depended upon America remaining the America of his youth," a "genteel America" whose "elitist social structure ma[de] that conquest all the more impressive" (Smith, *The Dark Side of Paradise* 21). In this light, Abe and Dick's embroilment in a black-on-black murder scandal betrays Fitzgerald's anxieties over "the encroachment of all forms of 'difference' into the preserve of white male privilege" (Smith, "The Figure on the Bed" 208). Likewise, the interracial romances between Mary and Hosain or Tommy and Nicole encode Fitzgerald's insecurities about the "the Hollywood of 'dark men' such as Rudolph Valentino" that gained eroticized popularity among white women during his time (Messenger 161).

But does this novel only "become" racial when black characters, Orientalist tropes, or interracial romances enter the picture? After a thorough glimpse, in Book One, into the Divers' marital dysfunction and Dick's already ensuing decline, Fitzgerald circles back, in Book Two, to give us a portrait of our protagonist before his ill-fated marriage. As an "Oxford Rhodes Scholar" and a graduate of Johns Hopkins and Yale, Dick, embarking on his psychiatric career in 1917, had also managed to avoid service in World War I and is thus conscious of having had so much good fortune in his life that it actually makes him nervous. "In his last year at New Haven some one referred to him as 'lucky Dick'—the name lingered in his head" (*Tender* 116). "'And Lucky Dick,'" he reflects (the words in quotation marks to emphasize them as lines Dick really thinks to



himself), ““he must be less intact, even faintly destroyed. If life won’t do it for him it’s not a substitute to get a disease, or a broken heart, or an inferiority complex, though it’d be nice to build out some broken side till it was better than the original structure”” (116). The defining trait of Fitzgerald’s young protagonist is a gnawing fear of what a lifelong *lack* of adversity has done or might do to his character. Dick’s paradoxically humble yet self-aggrandizing desire to be “broken” in—to be “faintly destroyed” for the sake of building some character—disposes him to risky behaviors, like the professionally unwise move of marrying one of his patients. But having long enjoyed the wind behind his sails, Dick is determined to make something of himself, and beyond a desire to be the greatest psychologist that ever lived, he hopes to attain not only the cold, lonely heights of professional stardom but the warmth of personal admiration from the little people around him: “he wanted to be brave and wise, but it was all pretty difficult. He wanted to be loved, too, if he could fit it in” (133). By Book Two, readers have already seen what Dick’s desire to be loved actually looks like, for Book One illustrates Dick’s “power of arousing a fascinated and uncritical love” by portraying his charisma from the perspective of a young American actress and ingenue named Rosemary Hoyt (27). Rosemary meets the Divers while vacationing on the Riviera and falls in love with Dick’s irresistible charm: “to be included in Dick Diver’s world for a while was a remarkable experience: people believed he made special reservations about them, recognizing the proud uniqueness of their destinies, buried under the compromises of how many years. He won everyone quickly with an exquisite consideration and a politeness that moved so fast and intuitively that it could be examined only its effect” (27-28). If Dick pursues the self-aggrandizing dream of being the greatest psychologist that ever lived, he also strives to

inhabit that position with an air of *selfless* solicitude, to enjoy the prestige of socioeconomic elite-ness without being resented for it or perceived as cold, callous, or condescending.

Are the scope of these aspirations and the nature of these anxieties race-neutral? Or is there something “white” about these professional insecurities and ambitions? Do we need Fitzgerald or his character to use the language of race or whiteness explicitly in order to draw this conclusion? And if we do conclude that whiteness structures the history, thinking, and self-presentation of Fitzgerald’s character, how do we produce an account of that whiteness more specific and nuanced than the appropriate but hackneyed term “privilege”?

These are the kinds of questions this dissertation seeks to address. “Scattered Supremacies: Locating Whiteness in Modernist Fiction” aims to expand the range of texts and textual dynamics in which we look for race as an operative factor in fiction by and about white people. I argue that modernist novels featuring largely white casts of characters and few themes or plotlines of overtly racial content are key sites for thinking about how white people manifest their racial identities in subtle and circuitous ways. To do this, I read a number of novels by four white, modernist writers: Jean Rhys’ *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939); William Faulkner’s *The Mansion* (1959); F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night* (1934); and Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* (1913), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). What unites all of these texts and makes them optimal archives for this dissertation is that (with the exception of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*) none of them are “about” race in the sense of overtly thematizing topics like

slavery and colonialism or focusing on conflicts between white people and people of color.

Any white-authored literary text that falls under this umbrella could, in theory, work as an archive for this dissertation given its theoretical and methodological objectives. The novels gathered in this study are particularly germane, however, because they not only revolve around relationships between white people but also portray these relationships in ways that specifically contrast the virtues of a particular white character or group of white people against the vices of other, less admirable or respectable whites. They are narratives, in other words, that draw (or, in Rhys' case, interrogate) distinctions between "good" and "bad" white people and are thus texts where the boundaries and connotations of whiteness are constantly being worked out, even if the racial discourses in question play out in terms that are not (so to speak) black and white, that do not involve white people's relationships with or ideas about Black, Asian, Latinx, or indigenous people. Additionally, Rhys, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Cather are uniquely germane to this study because they are writers who shared what we might describe as a cynical or tragic view of social and historical progress. Their fiction tends to highlight the drawbacks and pitfalls of modernity: the degradation of moral values; the types of cruelty and callousness that accompany fast-paced, socially atomized, money- and commodity-driven lives; the forms of community and humble rusticity being lost or already lost over time. These four novelists display a particular penchant for illuminating and foregrounding what they perceive to be the uglier qualities of themselves and/or their white contemporaries, and their fiction thus engages quite fervently in discourses of

virtue signaling or vice condemning through which the boundaries and meanings of whiteness are constantly (if not always consciously) being negotiated.

In the past few decades, modernist studies' encounters with critical race theory, ethnic studies, and postcolonial studies have galvanized analyses of race in modernist literature. While it is taken for granted that race is a key factor in texts by writers of color, critics tend to consider the racial dynamics of texts by white writers only when they involve primitivism, Orientalism, or scenes of interracial violence. This narrow framework exempts large swathes of white literary production from racial analysis simply because they do not feature overt racism or overtly racist representational forms. Such critical tendencies perpetuate a problem described by whiteness-studies scholar Richard Dyer, who observes that "to focus exclusively on those texts that are 'about' racial difference and interaction risks giving the impression that whiteness is only white, or only matters, when it is explicitly set against non-white, whereas whiteness reproduces itself as whiteness in all texts all of the time" (13). The challenge for more thorough analyses of white racial identity, Dyer contends, "is to see the specificity of whiteness, even when the text itself is not trying to show it to you, doesn't even know that it is there to be shown" (13-14).

This is certainly true of *Tender is the Night*. There is nothing in the novel or in Fitzgerald's essays or epistolary correspondence to suggest that the book is in any sense "about" whiteness. Yet as people of color both in and outside the academy have long pointed out (and as academics in the more recent field of critical whiteness studies have repeatedly echoed), white supremacy thrives precisely because many white people do not consider their own behavior or the circumstances of their lives as meaningfully marked

by race. If we restrict our racial analyses only to the behaviors and circumstances that white people themselves explicitly flag as racial, we would be forever looking only at the tip of an iceberg. The same principle applies for analyses of whiteness in literary texts. There are some white authors whose work acknowledges and even foregrounds the histories and contours of white racial identity. I am thinking here of writers like Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, E. M. Forster in *A Passage to India*, or William Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses*. Certainly, the critiques of colonialism and slavery embedded in these writers' works are full of oversights and contradictions. Conrad could recognize that imperialist Europe was, morally, the real heart of darkness yet remained wedded to visions of Africa as a place of civilization-less savagery. Faulkner's works express a horrified, haunted awareness of slavery as the curse of the South, yet in reckoning with its history, he perpetuated stereotypical tropes of blackness, and his white characters tend to wallow in cerebral, even suicidal despair rather than pursue material forms of economic or political reparation. These authors are far from perfect in the way they confront the acts and histories of violence that undergird white identity in America and Western Europe, but they do confront these things head on, and the racial discourses of these overtly racialized novels have received much scholarly attention. There are plenty of other white writers, however—or plenty of other works by the same writers—that are entirely oblivious to these topics, and even if a white writer's work thematizes race at a certain point within or even throughout a novel, this does not mean that that writer recognizes the full extent of how race and, specifically, whiteness informs their text and the world it represents. Faulkner is a perfect case in point. No one could read *The Sound and the Fury* or *Absalom! Absalom!* and say that Faulkner was unaware of how race

plays a monumental role in the history and present of the American South. But as I argue in one of this dissertation's chapters, most discussions of race in Faulkner's work focus on a limited archive of canonical novels that revolve around tensions between black and white Southerners. There are other, less interracial structured Faulkner texts in which race is no less present a factor despite the relative absence of black characters, texts where whiteness manifests in ways that are not necessarily conscious or intentional on Faulkner's behalf. In these novels, I argue, white racial identity assumes ideological and aesthetic forms that are subtle and indirect, ones that are especially relevant to critiques of white supremacy today precisely because of that subtlety and indirectness.

This is the *modus operandi*, then, of "Scattered Supremacies": reading novels by Rhys, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Cather, each chapter of this dissertation focuses on a single white, modernist author, revealing forms of whiteness in their fiction "even when the text itself is not trying to show it to [us], doesn't even know that it is there to be shown." I uncover the white-supremacist stakes of ideas, practices, and structures of feeling that that do not appear racial because they play out in relationships between or among white people who are neither engaging with nor even thinking about people of color. One of the tricky things about this argument is that, with the exception of Jean Rhys (who, though by no means unproblematic, was the most racially perceptive writer in the bunch), I contend that the authors in this study had a largely *unconscious* relationship to the particular racial dynamics I am tracking in their texts. There may be localized moments, here and there, where Cather's narrator comments on the whiteness of her heroine's skin or where Fitzgerald's protagonist muses on the tough, resilient nature of his Anglo-Saxon ancestors, but these are not the kinds of moments on which my

readings focus. I call attention, instead, to forms of whiteness inhering in discourses that are far more diffuse: the rhetoric of debt and finance that runs throughout one of Faulkner's novels, for example, or Dick Diver's ongoing obsession with reconciling his own history of social and economic privileges with a sense of himself as "good," selfless person. These are features of these texts—entire dimensions of them, really—whose racial coloring is not on their authors' radar.

Of course, judgments about the relative "consciousness" of a novelist's racial discourse are always complicated by questions of aesthetic irony and authorial intent, and I try to account for these factors throughout my readings. Particularly in the chapters on Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Cather, part of how I do this is to draw heavily on these authors' essays, interviews, or letters to provide a larger sense of their own racial views or the extent to which they thought about race at all (let alone whiteness, specifically) as a factor in their own lives and the world around them. Aside from using nonfiction writings to contextualize readings of race in these novels, however, I also ensure that my close readings themselves register, as much as possible, the various layers of irony and racial awareness that structure each author's representation of their white characters. Take my chapter on Jean Rhys, for example, where I read two novels that portray the ways in which poor, white, itinerant English women are exploited, alienated, and stigmatized by middle-class English men. There is abundant textual evidence *within* these novels that Rhys was keenly aware of the racial stakes of the misogyny and classism endured by her protagonists. She knew that their non-bourgeois domestic and sexual arrangements jeopardized their relationship to "Englishness" as a racial category, and she called attention to this within her fiction in a number of ways. Her keen awareness of

how racial distinctions contribute to her protagonists' oppression does not lead, however, to cross-racial forms of solidarity with people of color, and in fact, her protagonists often respond to their alienation not by rallying against "Englishness" as a classed and patriarchal category of racial exclusion but rather by trying to buy into it, acting more proper and bourgeois than their material circumstances actually allow.

My chapter thus registers the layers of racial self-awareness, the ambivalences, and the limits of Rhys' racial critique, and I strive to capture these nuances in the case of every author. There is a great deal of irony in Fitzgerald's representation of Dick Diver because *Tender is the Night* is a semiautobiographical novel in which Fitzgerald was looking back on his Jazz-Age past and trying to pinpoint the decadent behaviors that led to a precipitous professional decline in the 1930s. There are multiple aspects of Dick's character that Fitzgerald thus presents with an ironic bite, but the moment, for instance, where Dick contemplates his "Aryan" ancestry to pull himself out of a funk is not one of them. There is no ironization of this flicker of race pride, and the part of the novel that I identify as a locus of whiteness (Dick's self-critical yet egotistical fixation on being perceived as a kind and generous person who has worked for the socioeconomic comforts and privileges he enjoys) is not in any way thematized by Fitzgerald as a racially charged matter. Faulkner was deeply aware of slavery and racial prejudice as sins that haunted Southern whites, yet despite this historical critique of whiteness as a troubled racial identity, he also held a fervent, unironic belief in the liberal virtue of self-reliant individualism, something he believed that white people embodied in particular and needed to "teach" black people so that the latter would be "ready" for freedom. Faulkner's racial progressivism thus had its limits, and in *The Mansion*, which focuses on



the intra-racial conflict between a white tenant farmer and a white banker, his obsession with independence and self-enclosed individualism creeps into the text in the form of a white discourse of debt: a financially structured philosophy of conflict resolution that constantly looks forward to closure, to a “settlement” in which all moral debts are paid off and past acts of violence are compartmentalized to a no-longer-mentioned past, leaving all those involved debt-free with a sense of vindicated individualism. This financial discourse suffuses the novel’s plot and narration. That it is framework for thinking about justice and historical violence that derives from and privileges the emotional interests of white people is *not* a conscious object of critique on Faulkner’s behalf, even as the overtly racist comments or actions of white characters within the novel are clearly ironized. Cather is similar to Fitzgerald when it comes to questions of irony and intent. She was aware of the whiteness of her characters and sometimes remarked upon it in her texts, but she was not critical of that whiteness in any way. Her novels about bygone pioneers making austere livings on the unsettled frontier were informed by a keen disgust for the spoiled Philistinism of America’s modernized, early-twentieth-century bourgeoisie. Cather never thought or said much, however, about the whiteness of *either* her bourgeois contemporaries or the settlers glorified in her fiction. Whiteness operated for her as an invisible norm. She was not inclined to dissect or interrogate it (the way that Rhys or Faulkner were), and she could not really imagine writing novels about people who were not white. In her portraits of pioneer life, it was not her *intention* to glorify whiteness by memorializing the humble rusticity and epic resilience of white settlers, but she managed to do this nonetheless because her aversion to the spoiled Philistinism of America’s modern bourgeoisie led her to engage in wholly

unironic homages to the romantic virtues of white pioneers. In their life and in their fiction, the authors in this study thus displayed varying degrees of awareness about whiteness as a category of identity and an object of critique. Through careful attention to language, irony, and tone and recourse to an author's nonfiction, I attend to these idiosyncrasies throughout this dissertation's chapters, giving the sharpest account possible of the "consciousness" or "unconsciousness" of each writer's white racial discourse.

In developing an eye and ear for whiteness' myriad forms, then, "Scattered Supremacies" aims to step outside the box both in terms of the textual scenes and dynamics on which scholars typically rely for discussions of race and in terms of the racial content these novelists knowingly included in their work. What is ultimately at stake here is an expansion of racial optics—an broadening of the limited frameworks that structure the ways both literary critics and scholars of critical whiteness studies see race and expect it to look like. There are historical reasons for why the kinds of racial optics I am advancing here are especially urgent today, and I gesture toward some of those contemporary stakes later in this Introduction. For now, I would like to begin with a more detailed look at the state of existing scholarship in both modernist literary studies and critical whiteness studies, the two fields to which "Scattered Supremacies" contributes and on whose foundations it builds. The remainder of this Introduction proceeds in five parts. The first section offers a survey of how race has been treated as an object of analysis in modernist literary studies. The second provides a similar survey of critical whiteness studies, suggesting that even there, critics have been limited in their approaches to analyzing race as it manifests in the lives and cultural production of white

people. Section Three elaborates on the dissertation's reading methods in greater detail as well as the historical context of modernist literary production. Section Four then turns to the dissertation's contemporary historical context, outlining some structural specificities of white supremacy in the twenty first century and explaining how these contribute to a sense of the project's stakes. Finally, the last section provides a roadmap to the dissertation, breaking down and summarizing its chapters.

## **I. Race in Modernist Studies, Old and New**

There is a certain set of topics around which scholarship on race in modernist literature has tended to revolve: immigration, nativism, and xenophobia; colonialism, primitivism, and orientalism; Jim Crow in postbellum America and the ongoing legacies of slavery. These topics speak to the historical contexts of American and British modernism, with Britain at the height of its imperial empire in the early twentieth century and the U.S. experiencing new waves of immigration from Asia and Eastern Europe, which stoked reactionary, eugenicist fears about the so-called "rising tide of color." In exploring these topics, critics of literary modernism have made a great deal of headway illuminating both the spoken and unspoken racial fantasies and anxieties that informed modernist writing, especially insofar as these racial dynamics inhered in *interracial* relationships and conflicts, in white people's thinking about non-white people or non-European cultures or the actions of white people toward them. This has also meant, however, that the vast majority of modernism's literary critics look for the same things when they are thinking about racial dynamics and that modernist studies has thus gotten very good, over the past few decades, at identifying certain kinds of racial topic matter

while neglecting others. To illustrate this long-standing tendency, I will offer a brief synopsis of four works of modernist studies in which race is a primary focus, if not *the* primary focus. Two of these studies deal with American modernism and the other two deal with British modernism, demonstrating that the patterns and limitations being identified are not linked to a geographically specific archive. The studies range from 1995 to 2011, suggesting the longevity of the critical tendencies under consideration.

Case 1: Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, Pluralism* (1995). Michaels' book examines the differences between forms of racist American nationalism in the Progressive Era and the 1920s. His study aims to sharpen our understanding of how American writers' thinking about race and national identity changed over time. The difference between the nationalism of the Progressive Era versus that of the 1920s, Michaels argues, is that the former was not nativist: it was more concerned about the racial differences between black people and white people and was therefore, as far as new groups of immigrants were concerned, "prepared to welcome as exemplary candidates for American citizenship those 'aliens' who, twenty years later, would count as threats to the American family," so long as those aliens could be culturally marshalled as a social force to keep down African Americans (Michaels 10). Thus, for American nationalists in the 1910s, non-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant immigrants *could* be assimilated, which points, Michaels argues, to another difference between Progressive-Era and 1920s nationalisms: the latter "essentialized racism" and, in doing so, became what Michaels describes as "pluralist" (64). Racist nationalism in the Progressive Era had no problem thinking in terms of inferior or superior races, but with regard to non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants, it held out the hope that they could be racially

changed by Americanization. Racist nationalism in the 1920s was both nativist and pluralist: it did not conceptualize different races on a hierarchical scale, but it solidified the boundaries between races, conceived as a plurality of discrete entities, and repudiated any efforts at Americanizing immigrant others. Nativist, pluralist racism in the 1920s mobilized a new logic of racial identity, one that emphasized “not the inferiority of ‘alien’ races but their ‘difference,’” disarticulating racism from “supremacism,” which is *not* to say that racial difference is no longer a basis for perpetrating violence and maintaining inequality but that 1920s nativism did not do this through the explicit pronouncements of racial inferiority (Michaels 13, 14).

This is the overall argument of *Our America*, and Michaels’ chapters work to illustrate these distinct racial paradigms through historically informed close readings of modernist literary texts. Michaels begins by reading *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* to reveal discourses of heightened white racial consciousness in these texts, anxieties about the potential extinction of the white race due to the early-twentieth-century influx of non-white immigrants and World War I having killed too many Anglo-Saxon men (25-29). He then tracks the figure of the “Indian” in novels by Willa Cather, showing how “identification with the Indian could function ... as the assertion of an American identity that could be understood as going beyond citizenship,” a white nativist counter to incoming immigrants (44). The next cluster of Michaels’ readings compares and contrasts treatments of miscegenation and the figure of the mulatto by African American writers from the 1910s and 1920s (52-63). Another section teases out the differences between American nativism and other international or regional variants, a process that proceeds through readings of D. H. Lawrence’s primitivism, Ezra Pound’s

uses of the Chinese ideogram, and E. M. Forster's representations of the relationship between British colonists and colonized Indian subjects in *A Passage to India* (99-109). In these readings of modernist literature, *Our America* does an incredible job of taxonomizing subtly different forms of race- and nationality-based exclusion and stigma and shows how American modernist writers internalized and sometimes questioned their nation's anxieties and cultural scripts about who does and does not belong. Throughout Michaels' study, however, what counts as racial topic matter are moments in texts where white people are either consciously thinking about their own whiteness or assuming some kind of explicit relationship to people of color, whether it be social or ideational, identificatory or phobic. What Michaels' approach misses in reading Fitzgerald or Faulkner or Cather are the forms of racial discourse that are not expressed through tensions between white, Anglo-Saxon characters and non-white racial others, through instances of the former fetishizing the latter, or through explicit displays of white race pride. Obviously, these overtly racialized and racist textual dynamics are incredibly important and need to be discussed, but as this case study and the ones that follow will show, there is no shortage of literary criticism doing this kind of work.

Case 2: Jane Marcus' *Hearts of Darkness: White Women Write Race* (2004).

Focusing on British modernism and white women writers specifically, Marcus examines the ways that the fall of empire and rise of fascism informed modernist literature in the years between the two World Wars. The book is a collection of essays loosely organized around this topic and does not really have a single, overarching argument. It does, however, have two literary stars: Virginia Woolf and Nancy Cunard. The works of these two women receive the bulk of Marcus' attention, and they are set up as contrasting

models of what we might roughly describe as compromised and uncompromising feminist anti-racisms. Woolf's writing serves as Marcus' primary example of "how the empire was also written by the Liberals who opposed it," while Cunard is positioned as a "model of another [and, clearly, better] way to act as an antiracist public intellectual" (6, 7). Marcus' first chapter focuses on *A Room of One's Own* and dwells, specifically, on a single line from the text: "It is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her" (quoted in Marcus 24). From this starting point, the chapter embarks on an exhaustive analysis of how the figure of the black woman serves as both a condition of possibility and the limit of Woolf's white, supposedly anti-imperialist feminism. Woolf "dissociat[es] herself from nationalism and imperialism," Marcus argues, "by attributing the desire to possess the Other to specifically European male 'instinct'" (40). At the same time, Marcus argues, while shifting the onus of racist imperialism onto British men, Woolf herself cannot conceive of black women either as artists or as fellow Englishwomen. Instead, *A Room* "reaches back to all the other emancipatory feminisms that compared English marriage to slavery" and ends up appropriating black women's bodies as a metaphor for white women's oppression (26).

In a second chapter on Woolf, Marcus provides a more generous take on her politics, reading *The Waves* as an anti-imperialist text. This experimental modernist novel is comprised of the interior monologues of six characters, but Marcus' reading focuses only on two: the heroic, manly Percival, who works and dies as a British colonial officer in India, and the aspiring poet Bernard, whose monologues idolize and elegize Percival's colonial feats. Existing criticism on *The Waves*, Marcus argues, has failed to register

Woolf's *ironic* presentation of these characters. Critics have read Bernard and Percival as Woolf's endorsements of an imperialist, patriarchal nationalism, but for Marcus "[the novel's] parody and irony mock the complicity of the hero and the poet in the creation of a collective national subject through an elegy for imperialism" (63). The central dynamic of the text in this reading—one that Marcus positions Woolf as critiquing—is the way in which her characters "inscribe their class and race superiority only by imagining a world of the savage Other in India ..., where their representative, Percival ..., secures their privilege by violent exertions of brute force" (66). The characters in *The Waves* "each fantasize India as dark, dirty, disordered, and directly threatening their own deaths. The language of their dreams of Percival in India is thoroughly racist and colonialist—'incompetent ... natives in loincloths,' 'strange sour smells,' 'remote provinces are fetched out of darkness,' ... 'the dancing and drumming of naked men with assegais'" (Marcus 83-84). Through such language, Marcus contends, Woolf "exposes" her characters' "complicity with imperialism" through their "mythologizing of Percival as a hero" (84).

Whether framing Woolf's politics as an object of critique or recuperation, Marcus homes in on moments where Woolf's narrators or characters either refer to a person of color or envision relationships between white and non-white people. What race as an analytic category boils down to, here, is "the European view of people color" (to use a phrase from the Marcus' Introduction), and this remains true when Marcus turns her attention to her book's second literary star (2). Her chapter on Nancy Cunard champions Cunard's unrecognized status as an important knowledge producer in the fields of black history and studies of the black diaspora, despite the fact that she was white (Marcus



122). Positioning Cunard as a model of white solidarity with black liberation, the chapter's entire argument revolves around copious discussions of Cunard's relationship to black people and black culture: accounts of her lifelong political activism, the influence of black art forms on her poetry, and, most importantly, her work organizing, editing, and publishing the monumental but now-forgotten *Negro* anthology, a 855-page volume of writing and illustrations compiled from an international array of contributors—two-thirds of whom were black—on the history and culture of black people in U.S., Africa, South America, and the Caribbean (Marcus 126-128, 132, 139-144). Marcus' *Hearts of Darkness* illuminates a key distinction that brings this dissertation's interventions into sharper focus. The problem is not that scholars of race in modernist literature have only viewed race as having to do with writers of color and that they thus never talk about whiteness. The focus of Marcus' book (as its subtitle makes clear) is how race informs the views and cultural productions of white people. The issue, rather, is that *when* critics examine whiteness, they tend—to recycle Richard Dyer's excellent phrasing—"to focus exclusively on those texts [or moments in texts] that are 'about' racial difference," which "risks giving the impression that whiteness is only white, or only matters, when it is explicitly set against non-white" (Dyer 13).

Case 3: Urmila Seshagiri's *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (2010).

Seshagiri's study focuses specifically on British modernism and offers an account of race as "a central organizing aesthetic category instead of merely a social problem" (6). Critics of British modernist literature, she contends, have primarily examined race as a "scientific and sociopolitical" category, one tied to the production of "imperialist 'knowledge'" facilitating the colonial domination of nonwhite races (7). From this critical

perspective, the types of racial thinking that informed modernism in Britain involved an understanding of race that was fixed, static, and stratified, one that connoted essentialist differences between various groups of human beings with certain groups inherently inferior or superior to others. Yet “modernism’s varied conceptions of race,” Seshagiri argues, “were often unrelated to the sociopolitical concerns raised by colonial contexts” (6). Without seeking to downplay the violent realities and cultural impacts of British colonialism, Seshagiri “challenge[s] the assumption that artistic treatments of race in early twentieth-century England were predominantly or univocally imperialist, demonstrating instead that modernism conceived of race as shifting rather than set, disordered rather than hierarchical” (6). Aesthetically rather than socio-politically speaking, modernists “transformed the outward signs of race into artistic content notable for its *unreliability*” (Seshagiri 9, original emphasis). They created an “aesthetics of race” that privileged “abstraction, decenteredness, ... irresolution, and nonlinearity” (9).

As evidence for this argument, Seshagiri reads a number of British (and Irish) modernist writers, but in almost every case, what “race” entails is a white protagonist encountering people of color, consuming non-European cultures, or entering spaces coded as non-European. Reading race, in other words, again means looking for moments where white “is explicitly set against non-white” (Dyer 13). In her reading of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Seshagiri focuses on how Dorian’s decadent aestheticism is achieved through a “willful embrace of non-Western culture” (37). She observes how he accumulates “perfumes, jewels, embroideries, and textiles from India, China, Ceylon, Arabia, Indonesia, [and] Japan,” and tracks his movements through Chinese opium dens and his liaisons with a Malaysian prostitute (37). Her reading of

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* positions Mr. Kurtz as an embodiment of modernism who racially reinvents himself in Africa, "breaking away from the accumulated weight of European cultural practices," with Marlow as his artist-apprentice "who transports the 'unsound method of Kurtz's modernism back to Europe'" (43). This reading fixates on Kurtz's and Marlow's identifications with Africa and African peoples (44-53). Her treatments of Wyndham Lewis and Rebecca West focus on the role of primitivism and black characters in their Vorticist literary productions (78-112). Seshagiri's reading of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* looks at colonial commodities like tea and china in the Ramsay household and unpacks the trope of Lily Briscoe's "Chinese eyes" (150-167). Finally, her reading of *Orlando* shows how the text's destabilizing play with sex and gender is premised on a constant reinforcing of white, imperial English identity, an argument advanced through readings of the opening scene where Orlando "slic[es] at the head of a Moor," Woolf's use of a Turkish Gypsy named Rustum el Sadi as the antagonist of the novel, and the text's constructions of the East (qua Turkey) as racially savage and culturally inferior to the West (qua England) (178-191).

Seshagiri's discussion of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* merits a special mention. Out of all the readings in her study, it is the least dependent on the appearance of non-European peoples or cultures for its discussions of race. However, in revealing the "deep—and ultimately impossible—desire for racial belonging" that permeates Ford's novel, Seshagiri exemplifies a *different kind* of limitation on racial analysis that I will discuss further in the following section on critical whiteness studies (114). In the absence of characters of color, Seshagiri tracks *The Good Soldier*'s anxieties about racial identity by pinpointing moments where the novel's narration or dialogue feature language and

imagery that *explicitly* signal concerns about whiteness or other forms of non-Anglo-Saxon European identity. She notes, for instance, how “the designations ‘English,’ ‘Irish Catholic,’ and ‘American’ serve only to denote disparate, inconstant states of being” and examines moments where characters fret about belonging or not belonging to these categories (116). Later in her discussion, the appearance of a “Gypsy caravan” in Ford’s novel is interpreted as “underscor[ing] the racial motility that is modernity’s promise as well as its curse” (121). In other cases, Seshagiri focuses on language that blatantly signifies racial identity in physical terms: “Despite Edward’s ‘honest blue eyes’ and Leonora’s ‘extraordinarily fair’ complexion, Dowell deems the couple’s apparent racial authenticity ‘too good to be true’” (116). Thus, in cases where whiteness is not explicitly set against non-white, the discussion latches onto moments where white people *are* thinking *explicitly* about racial categories and white identity, moments signaled by the invocation of national and ethnic categories, such as “English,” “Irish,” “American,” or “Gypsy,” or by physical descriptions signaling racial whiteness (blue eyes, fair skin). As I will explain later in this introduction, many works of whiteness-studies scholarship operate in a similar way, and I am not arguing that there is anything wrong with those studies or with Seshagiri’s reading of Ford. I am suggesting, rather, that even this method of reading race in the lives and cultural productions of white people—where race can connote inter- or cross-racial identifications and conflicts *or intra*-racial dynamics where white characters *explicitly* reflect on their own racial status—still does not exhaust the range of possible forms that race can take and continues to rely on more or less overt markers of racial topic matter. “Scattered Supremacies” seeks to uncover even subtler, more tacit racial dynamics.

Case 4: Greg Forter's *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism*

(2011). Forter's book reads canonical modernism as "a response to changes in the sex/gender and racial systems that took place between 1880 and 1920," changes that were experienced by the authors in his study as the loss of a "form of white manhood that had been dominant" in prior decades (1). From "about 1830 to 1880," Forter contends, "to be a (white) man meant to 'make oneself' in the capitalist marketplace," and "[t]he qualities that enabled such success were an aggressive assertiveness and competitive vigor thought of as innately male" (1). If this male competitiveness were not in some way checked outside the marketplace, however, it would constitute a threat to social order, so being a white man was *also* imagined to include "softer virtues" such as "moral compassion, self-restraint, [and] emotional sensitivity," all believed to be transmitted to men by women in the domestic sphere (2). Over the course of the nineteenth century, Forter explains, the growth of monopoly capitalism "reduced men to dependents in large bureaucratic structures" and thwarted the prospect of "autonomous self-making" (2). Increasing numbers of white men found themselves in positions of economic dependence viewed as feminized, and these changes in gender relations overlapped with changes in race relations, as emerging labor markets for non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants and African-American freedmen further troubled "the link between selling one's labor on the open market and experiencing oneself as white" (3).

By the 1880s, white Americans began responding to these changes in the mainstream (i.e., non-high-modernist) sphere of the nation's culture. This response took the reactionary form of an unambivalent embrace of those male traits previously coded as socially disruptive: "primal force, instinctual vitality, aggression, and bodily strength"

(3). The main argument of Forter's study, however, is that the response of canonical modernists to the loss of nineteenth-century white masculinity differed from that of mainstream America. In readings of Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Faulkner, and Cather, Forter shows that these writers "grieve[d] not just for the loss of the aggressively masculine component of nineteenth-century white manhood, but also for the loss of its compassionate interior – its 'feminine' capacity for sympathetic identification" (4). The latter was especially dear to these novelists because it symbolized a capacity for art, for "lyrical and sensuous responsiveness" (4). On the one hand, America's canonical modernists "yearn[ed] for a masculinity less rigidly polarized against the feminine" (4). On the other hand, Forter maintains, they also could not "avoid internalizing the imperatives of the emergent gender order" and "came in part to identify with the hard, invulnerable, and dominative white manhood consolidated in this period," thus "denigrat[ing] the feminine responsiveness" they "experienced as intimately linked to their creative powers" (4). This results in canonical American modernism being marked by an affective stance of blocked mourning: "the very qualities and capacities that these [authors] valued in the manhood they had lost were [ones] they felt impelled to disparage as unmanly" (4-5). Their books thus "'resolve' themselves into assertions that the manhood they value *cannot* be grieved," and they "memorializ[e] blocked mourning as the most poignant and beautiful and *manly* response to socially induced loss" (5, original emphases).

This blocked mourning over lost gender ideals also, Forter adds, had racial consequences. The modernist conflict between fondness and disdain for artistic femininity in men "resulted in these texts' unleashing of melancholic aggression toward

... women, effeminate men, and racial minorities,” groups perceived to have access to forms of femininity that modernists ambivalently mourned (5). In attempting to resolve their white gender ambivalences, Forter argues, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Cather often resorted to primitivist “fantasies of the racial other,” but racial otherness figured here *not* as some “essence of primal maleness” but rather as “a set of de-binarized gender attributes that seemed to [these writers] enlivening yet lost and unavailable to white people” (6). In the end, Forter contends, the primitivist project was “one that each author came to reject as sentimental” because all of them, ultimately, “retained a naturalized, epidermal conception of race that proved at last insuperable” (6). Because they came to stand for coveted yet torturously inaccessible gender ideals, racial minorities become scapegoats for canonical modernists’ misplaced melancholic aggression.

Forter’s argument, with its numerous moving parts, is the most complex of the four case studies provided here, and to summarize each of his chapters in a way that does justice to their nuance would take more space than this already lengthy survey of modernist-studies scholarship can afford. In the interest of concision, I am only going to engage closely with one of Forter’s chapters, his treatment of Fitzgerald, which—like Seshagiri’s reading of *The Good Soldier*—goes furthest in overcoming the methodological and archival limitations I am trying to identify. Forter’s Fitzgerald chapter focuses on *The Great Gatsby*, and when he reaches the part of his argument that has to do with race, he immediately notes that “of all the works discussed in [his] study, *Gatsby* is the least *explicitly* concerned with race, the one in which that category is least visibly inscribed” (42, original emphasis). His chapters on Hemingway, Faulkner, and

Cather hew more closely to the model of white-explicitly-set-against-nonwhite racial analysis I have been sketching above. The history of black-white race relations plays a key role in the Faulkner chapter, and primitivism is at the center of his discussions of race in Hemingway and Cather. In *Gatsby*, however race assumes less stark, interracial manifestations. After illuminating Gatsby's simultaneously masculine and feminine elements and noting how the latter are at once celebrated and stigmatized, the chapter segues into an argument about race that builds on Richard Dyer's claim that white identity suffers from a "*paradox of embodiment*": whiteness "attaches to bodies infused with a 'spirit' whose condition is its invisibility, but which nonetheless is meant to distinguish the racially unmarked (white) body from the bodies of non-whites – i.e., from bodies lacking in 'spirit,' bereft of the energetic drive to colonize, order, give form, both to their own appetites and to the external world" (Forter 43). This tension revolves particularly around the issue of sexuality, where the "dark" temptations posed by the body's sexual drives threaten to jeopardize the purity of the white body and its desired self-definition in terms of higher, more transcendent intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural properties. We can see this problem play out in *Gatsby*, Forter argues, in the tension between Gatsby *prior* to kissing Daisy, when he is a pure product of his own imagination (sprung from his Platonic conception of himself, as the famous line goes), and Gatsby *after* kiss Daisy, when he is physically "incarnated" and subject to the "perils that come with the body's entanglement in heterosexual desire" (Forter 43, 44).

This part of Forter's argument, then, does not require the presence of nonwhite characters or non-European cultures in order to make a claim about race in Fitzgerald's novel. As it stands, however, the argument remains quite metaphysical and abstract, and



almost as if Forter himself senses this, he goes on to flesh out his claims by citing various moments where race *is* broached more explicitly as a topic in the novel. This begins by pointing out how Fitzgerald codes Daisy “as both the ‘object-cause’ of Gatsby’s desire and as morally blackened to the point of being unworthy of it” (45). In her affair with Gatsby, “Daisy participates in a sexual licentiousness that threatens the myth of Southern white women’s purity [she hails, Forter notes, from Kentucky]. Indeed, this licentiousness is conventionally split off and ascribed to black women in that myth’s construction” (45). In this light, Daisy is morally and, in a figurative sense, racially “blackened,” a point Forter then reinforces through a scene where Tom Buchanan, in one of his overtly white-supremacist tirades, hesitates for a moment to claim Daisy as white (45). Daisy’s blackness thus jeopardizes Gatsby’s whiteness by entangling him in the perils of embodiment and sexual desire. Moreover, Forter adds, “if Gatsby’s whiteness is constructed in part through the assignation of darkness and sexual impurity to Daisy, the novel also alludes more than once to the ethno-racial residue of what his self-creation has sought to shed”—the vaguely Jewish James Gatz that is supposed to have been erased by Jay Gatsby (46). Forter gives two examples of such allusions to Gatsby’s racial residue. The first is the novel’s reference to Gatsby as “Trimalchio,” an allusion to a lavish, partying character in Petronius’ *Satyricon* who is also, Forter notes, “a *freedman* and has therefore once been a slave” (47, original emphasis). Though slavery in the Roman Empire did not necessarily connote blackness, it did in the United States, and the allusion would have been read, Forter argues, as “blackening” Gatsby’s character (47). That blackening is reiterated again in the scene when Gatsby and Nick Carraway drive across the Queensboro Bridge and see “three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl,” partying in

a limo “driven by a white chauffeur” (Fitzgerald qtd in Forter 47). Nick’s comments on the scene, Forter contends, draw a similarity “between Jay Gatsby and the limousine’s black ‘bucks.’ The former’s *class* masquerade is homologous to the *racial* mimicry of whites by blacks” (47, original emphases).

The further we go into the chapter’s treatment of race, in other words, the more Forter’s claims become tied to tropes of blackness, whether these pertain to black or white characters. I do not want this to overshadow the fact that Forter’s discussion does still begin with an optic that illuminates a form of whiteness *not* tied to typical markers of racial content. Indeed, the chapter ends this way, too. The final maneuver of Forter’s reading is to argue that Fitzgerald preserves at the *disembodied* level of form the kind of lyrically and artistically feminine masculinity that could *not* be embodied at the level of plot. In terms of style, Nick Carraway’s narration is given to “lyrically expressive flights” of emotion, especially in moments where he is identifying with Gatsby (50). In these formal displays of “extraordinary lyricism,” *Gatsby* “memorialize[s] the manhood that the novel insists (at the level of content) can have no *social* incarnation” (Forter 16, original emphasis). Because Fitzgerald had also internalized turn-of-the-century America’s reactionary idolization of hard, aggressive masculinity, the “‘feminine’ (i.e., subjectively effusive) creativity” exuded by these flights of unmanly lyricism cannot be given free reign, so Fitzgerald further “supplements [them] with a more ruthlessly ‘masculine’ formal project” (16). Outside these bursts of lyricism, Nick’s narration assumes a very detached, objective voice, a “‘hardness’ of masculine rigor and formal control” (49). Through this Eliotic “impersonality,” Nick maintains a “disembodied distance with respect to both Fitzgerald and Gatsby,” and “the cultivation of [this]

impersonal form is an effort to approximate the ‘subject without properties’ [the transcendent, invisible, non-corporeality] that is both the norm and exclusionary ideal of racial whiteness” (50, 16). Forter thus begins and ends with readings of white racial identity that do not require whiteness to be explicitly set against nonwhite. I want to acknowledge this while still insisting on a larger point: although we might be able to find a few readings of modernist literature that track the operations of whiteness beyond interracial violence or cross-racial/cross-cultural identification, finding such readings is like finding a needle in a haystack. Even in the one chapter of the one book in this survey where such a reading occurs, it is blended with and corroborated by forms of evidence where racial content implies tropes of blackness (blackened Daisy, Gatsby as Trimalchio, the Negro “bucks” in the limousine).

In 2008, Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz belatedly declared the advent of “the New Modernist Studies” (belatedly because, according to Mao and Walkowitz, modernist studies assumed its newer form “on or about 1999,” well before the publication of their article) (737). Since the turn of the twenty-first century, they claim, the field of modernist studies has been expanding in three ways:

As scholars demonstrate the fertility of questioning rigid temporal delimitations, periods seem inevitably to get bigger (one might think of “the long eighteenth century” or “the age of empire”). Meanwhile, interrogations of the politics, historical validity, and aesthetic value of exclusive focus on the literatures of Europe and North America have spurred the study (in the North American academy) of texts produced in other quarters of the world or by hitherto little-recognized enclaves in the privileged areas. In addition to these temporal and spatial expansions, there has been what we are calling here a vertical one, in which once quite sharp boundaries between high art and popular forms of culture have been critiqued and reconfigured .... (Mao and Walkowitz 737-738)

The New Modernist Studies, then, has been incorporating more and more material within its ambit: texts from before the 1870s or 1880s or from after 1939; texts from more geographically diverse (even “global”) locales; texts excluded from the “high modernist” canon. It is difficult not to infer from all this a sense, within the field, that these “expansions” are necessary because critics of modernist literature have said everything that could be and needs to be said about the texts and authors we have traditionally read.

“Scattered Supremacies” suggests, however, that this is not true. Modernist studies still has unfinished business, specifically with regard to its analyses of whiteness. As Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers write in *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*, the New Modernist Studies tends to approach race through optics that are both more transnational and more interdisciplinary than the field’s older incarnation (166-169). This is, of course, a good thing. Such innovations have produced wonderful works of scholarship that offer a fuller account of how race has shaped modernist cultural production in a broadening array of contexts. I am not suggesting, in other words, that we need to stop our field’s expansions into these new areas of inquiry (though we should be wary—particularly regarding this expansion’s geographical axis—of how moves to claim texts from outside of Europe and America as material for our field might carry culturally and intellectually “imperialist” valences). What I *am* suggesting is that there are clear oversights in the way we have read race and, specifically, whiteness in modernist studies, old *and* new—limitations on where we look for race as an operative factor in the lives and cultural production of white people that are not necessarily fixed by adopting more transnational or interdisciplinary optics. It is worth reiterating here that the problem is *not* that scholars of modernist literature—before or after 1999—have failed to consider race as it pertains

to the work of white writers. The vast majority if not the entirety of Michaels', Marcus', Seshagiri's, and Forter's studies examine race as it informs writing by white people. The problem is that *when* critics have considered race in this context, they gravitate overwhelmingly toward moments in which white people consume non-European cultures or visualize, stigmatize, fetishize, or socialize with people of color. Such moments are obviously as if not more important to a comprehensive account of race as moments where white people interact with other white people, but we have mountains of scholarship on the former and almost none on the latter. One would think that the advent of critical whiteness studies in the 1990s, a field entirely dedicated to the examination of white racial identity, would provide insights and models for overcoming these constraints. As I suggest in what follows, however, whiteness studies has in fact displayed a similar set of limitations.

## **II. Race in Critical Whiteness Studies**

I have been drawing, throughout this Introduction, on the words of Richard Dyer, who writes, in his 1997 publication *White*, that to focus, when examining whiteness, “exclusively on those texts that are ‘about’ racial difference and interaction risks giving the impression that whiteness is only white, or only matters, when it is explicitly set against non-white” (13). The previous section has shown how an interracial focused approach to analyzing whiteness has yielded a host of invaluable insights into the racial dynamics of modernist literature while also placing limits on the types of textual material scholars marshal for their discussions. Dyer is a film critic, however, not a scholar of literary modernism, and his words, in context, describe analytic tendencies that affect the

field of critical whiteness studies. What this means, of course, is that the methodological and archival problems I have been detailing with regard to studies of modernism—the limited ways in which we read race and the limited places in which we look for it—have *also* restricted the interdisciplinary field entirely dedicated to explicating whiteness in all its forms. The fact that Dyer explicitly names and critiques these tendencies implies that his contribution to critical whiteness studies will go beyond them—and it does. But as I will discuss, in order to get beyond moments where whiteness is explicitly set against nonwhite, Dyer and other scholars have tended to shift their focus to what are still very “heavy-handed” forms of white racial identity: moments where white people forthrightly idealize their own race, proclaim the superiority of European cultures and civilizations, or equate the word “white” or images of whiteness with unparalleled beauty and intelligence. There is indeed attention, then, to practices in which white people manifest their racial identities in ways that do not require the presence of people of color, but the ways in which this albeit productive vein of analysis have been pursued still do not to account for many of the subtler forms that white racial identity can take.

Critical whiteness studies as a recognizable field was born in the 1990s, mainly through the publication of Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) along with Dyer’s *White* (1997), the works of multiple historians, like David Roediger, Theodore Allen, and Noel Ignatiev, and Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993). Let me provide a brief account of two of these field-defining studies, Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* and Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), to illustrate how whiteness studies, from its origins, has

marshaled a critical methodology that focuses, as Dyer argues, on moments where whiteness is explicitly set against nonwhite. Take what may be considered Morrison's statement of purpose in her brief but landmark study of whiteness in American literature. Morrison argues that studies of race have been dominated by a "pattern of thinking about racialism in terms of its consequences on the victim—of always defining it ... from the perspective of its impact on the object of racist policy and attitudes" (11).

[T]hat well-established study should be joined with another, equally important one: the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it. ... What I propose here is to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered these notions. The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters. (Morrison 11-12)

With this as its *raison d'être*, *Playing in the Dark* goes on to examine, in works by Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, and Willa Cather, what Morrison calls "American Africanism": "the ways in which a nonwhite Africanlike or (Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served" (6). The book, in other words, is very explicitly and purposefully built around a methodological approach that examines literary whiteness in terms of the narrative, metaphorical, and affective uses served by black people and figures of blackness in white-authored American fiction. As Morrison herself describes this methodology and rationale, "What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary 'blackness,' the nature—even the cause—of literary 'whiteness'" (9).

David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* adopts a similar approach to Morrison's study, though working within the discipline of history rather than literary studies and thus illustrating how the critical limitations under consideration here stretch across whiteness studies as an inter-disciplinary field. As a labor historian, the question Roediger asks is "why the white working class settles for being white"—or, better, "why and how whites reach the conclusion that their whiteness is meaningful" (6). The answer, *Wages* argues, is that

whiteness was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline. ... [T]he heritage of the [American] revolution made independence a powerful masculine personal ideal. But slave labor and "hireling" wage labor proliferated in the new nation. One way to make peace with the latter was to differentiate it sharply from the former. (13)

*Wages* focuses, in other words, on how the "image of the Black population as 'other,'" imagined as "embodying the preindustrial, erotic, careless style of life the white worker hated and longed for," informed the self-image of white working-class Americans "disciplined and made anxious by fear of dependency" (14). As a historian, Roediger tracks how this sense of whiteness grew over time. Prior to the nineteenth century, he argues, white workers did not identify their status as workers with the racial concept of whiteness. This was because there still existed in early America, many forms of unfree, dependent labor among non-elite whites. Between "indentured servitude, impressment, apprenticeship, convict labor, farm tenancy," and more, "[t]he many gradations of unfreedom among whites made it difficult to draw fast lines between any idealized free white worker and a pitied or scorned servile Black worker" (25). By the early nineteenth century, Roediger contends, white workers, from farm hands to domestics, incited a



conscious shift away from calling themselves or being called “servants” and toward being called, instead, “hired” or “help” because of the former term’s association with slaves and slave labor (47-50). Moving further into the nineteenth century, Roediger highlights the *ambivalence* with which white workers and labor radicals in the 1830s and 1840s resorted to comparisons between their situation and chattel slavery: while the comparison could help to make the case for the severity of the white working-class’ exploitation by employers, white laborers were also loathe to be associated with blackness and the demoralized qualities of weakness, resignation, and servility it connoted (66). By the 1850s, Roediger notes, “free labor” or “free white labor” had become the preferred idiom around which labor radicals rallied (80-81). A later chapter examines white working-class cultures of blackface minstrelsy, arguing that blackface allowed working-class whites to project onto African Americans the leisurely, undisciplined habits and behaviors that white workers simultaneously longed for and repudiated as they themselves were increasingly subject, in the nineteenth century, to forms of industrial labor control (95-110).

Neither Morrison nor Roediger are unique in focusing on whiteness’ construction through its relation to blackness or to other forms of nonwhite racial difference. Despite being published four years prior to *Playing in the Dark*, for instance, Aldon Lynn Nielsen’s *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (1988) is essentially a study of American Africanism in twentieth-century American poetry. The whole book traces the ways in which stereotyped images of blackness appear in texts by white poets and function in ways that shore up positive images of whiteness. For whiteness-studies scholarship in the disciplines of history, legal

studies, anthropology, and sociology, the prevailing task has been to detail the ways in which whiteness as a racial category has been historically and socially constructed. Over the years, this has yielded many excellent studies, but these studies all tend to discuss a similar set of topics: anti-abolitionism, westward expansion, frontier settlement, naturalization law, blackface minstrelsy, the exclusion of African Americans from organized labor, anti-immigrant hostility (particularly toward people of Asian or Mexican descent), redlining, housing covenants, reactionary backlash against Civil Rights initiatives like affirmative action, and the perpetuation of bigoted ideas about interracial marriage and parenting. All of these topics articulate the social and historical construction of whiteness in terms of the oppressive, exclusionary relationships that white people—or racially liminal people looking to “become” white—have maintained toward people of color. They are the focus of most of the field’s foundational and widely known publications, including not just Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness* but also his *Working toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (2005), Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters*, Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (1995), Ian Haney López’s *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (1996), Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998), and George Lipsitz’s *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (1998). These studies of the political movements, legislation, economic structures, and social habits on which whiteness rests join more aesthetically and culturally oriented approaches to studying white racial identity, like Morrison’s and Nielsen’s, in continuing to adopt an optic that locates

whiteness largely or solely in white people's interactions with or representations of people of color.

This is the field *into* which Dyer intervenes when he warns about focusing exclusively on texts (or historical archives) where whiteness is explicitly set against nonwhite. His admonition speaks to the extent of the problem, yet his own study—along with those of a few other scholars in the field—illustrates how even the approaches taken to overcome these methodological and archival limitations still leave some unfinished business that newer scholars can pursue. Dyer's *White*, along with studies like Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (1998) and Renée Curry's *White Women Write White: H.D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Whiteness* (2000), constitutes a smaller but growing vein of scholarship in the field that emphasizes how race permeates the thinking, practices, and cultural production of white people even where whiteness is *not* explicitly set against nonwhite. In order to do this, Dyer, Babb, and Curry track the countless ways in which white people, throughout history, have more or less *forthrightly* valorized themselves. Their studies demonstrate how the aesthetic features, moral and social values, and cultural achievements of white people—namely, upper- to middle-class Anglo-Saxon Protestants—have constantly been enshrined by fellow whites as universal ideals. In readings of film and visual culture, Dyer shows how whiteness is accorded connotations of heavenliness, cleanliness, intelligence, chastity, and a robust spirit of enterprise by looking at the use of light in European paintings (especially paintings of white women) or at harrowing representations of resourceful, perseverant, muscular white men in colonial adventure films (Dyer 82-183). Curry's study tracks the ways in which poetry by white

women has consistently associated the color white and white imagery (like snowy mountaintops or white flowers) with “aesthetic beauty,” an “undebatable desirability,” or “innocence, clarity, mastery, and perfection” (54, 28, 107). Babb shows how large-scale institutions and discourses at the turn of the twentieth century, like World’s Fairs, etiquette books, and educational curricula of public schools and settlement houses, systematically idolized the values and accomplishments of upper- to middle-class Anglo-Saxon Protestants (118-166). In examining how whiteness has mattered even when not set against nonwhite, the attention of these critics has thus been limited to cultural dynamics in which whiteness and white people are explicitly valorized (by white people themselves) as paragons of civilization and virtue. Although these studies provide an important supplement to the approaches taken by critics like Morrison and Roediger, it is also true that the pendulum simply swings here from one form of starkly racial content to another: from moments where white people overtly stigmatize or fetishize people of color to moments where white people overtly idolize whiteness and other white people.

To be sure, there *are* a few works of whiteness-studies scholarship that follow neither of these approaches, and “Scattered Supremacies” takes some of these studies as models in terms of how it thinks about the ways in which whiteness can manifest. In order to make clear how these other works of scholarship provide points of departure for this dissertation, however, I first want to outline in more detail its own methods of racial analysis.

### III. Race in “Scattered Supremacies”: Intra-racial Conflict and Economic

#### Virtues

As my opening example from Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night* suggests, the ideas, social habits, and structures of feeling that “Scattered Supremacies” illuminates as facets of white racial identity are defined by neither white people’s stigmatizations or fetishizations of people of color nor overt idolizations of whiteness or white racial superiority. This dissertation uncovers social and affective forms of whiteness that are both subtler and more oblique, and in order to do this, I focus on dynamics where the contours of whiteness emerge out of *conflicts between* different classes of white people—on where, how, and why certain white people try to *distinguish* themselves from other whites. A key part of my argument about *Tender is the Night* concerns the ways in which Dick Diver seeks to contrast himself, as a hard-working “professional,” against the wealthy American leisure class to which his wife Nicole belongs. My chapter on Rhys shows how the class standing of Rhys’ impoverished female protagonists jeopardizes their English whiteness in the eyes of bourgeois English men and women. In my chapter on Faulkner, I show how whiteness is tied to critiques of debt and indebtedness that play out over the course of a plot centering on the conflict between a white tenant farmer and a white banker. Finally, my chapter on Cather elucidates her disdain for America’s (implicitly white) early-twentieth-century bourgeoisie and her construction of resilient, bygone white settlers eking out austere livings on the frontier as figures of a superior whiteness lost to the historical tides of modernization. In all of these cases, the boundaries and meanings of whiteness as a category are constructed through the efforts

of white authors or white characters to distance themselves from other whites whose values, character traits, or social behaviors are deemed suspect or degenerate.

In order to flesh out this racial framework as well as place it in historical context, let me return, briefly, to Forter's argument in *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism*. As Forter explains, over the course of the nineteenth century, changes in the structures of capitalism, like the rise of monopolies and big business, increasingly "reduced [white] men to dependents in large bureaucratic structures" and thwarted the prospect of "autonomous self-making" (Forter 2). As these changes rendered white masculinity less synonymous with self-made independence, both mainstream Americans and America's canonical modernist writers responded via attempts to reprise or to mourn the forms of white masculinity that had been lost. "Scattered Supremacies" begins with a similar historical premise but takes the argument in a different direction. Forter is correct to observe that by the turn of the twentieth century, the escalating scale and pace of modernized capitalism had given rise to numerous social, economic, and cultural transformations that threatened a nineteenth-century ideal of morally and economically virtuous whiteness—a whiteness imagined, by default, as male. However, in addition to the rise of monopoly capitalism and the dwarfing of workers within increasingly large corporate and bureaucratic structures, we might also include amongst these changes a host of developments that played key roles in the writing and lives of the authors in this study.

The postwar boom of the Roaring 20s brought about the rise of the wealthy American leisure class, a decadent and thoroughly white demographic who serves as the de facto antagonist of Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*. As I show through recourse to

Fitzgerald's essays and letters, he himself, both through marriage and his own auspiciously timed literary success, was swept into the tides of Jazz-Age extravagance, and when his personal and professional life went into a tailspin in the 1930s (along with the nation's economy), he tried to salvage himself by clinging to an implicitly racialized ideal of hard-working professionalism defined in contrast to the morally dissipating effects of leisure-class wealth and comfort. By the turn of the twentieth century, the creeping tentacles of modern business and finance had also begun to encroach even upon less modernized, rural areas of the nation like Faulkner's South. These developments are the basis of Faulkner's Snopes trilogy, which wrestles with the moral and cultural threats posed by predatory lending and other forms of ruthless, rationalized capitalism to Yoknapatawpha County's humble, proudly independent community. In Europe, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, imperialist discourses were rife with concerns about the specter of white racial degeneration in the colonies, fears about white colonists slumping (due to climate and exposure to the alleged dispositions of black and brown colonized subjects) into idleness and sexual licentiousness. Such colonial discourses provoked, in turn, concomitant fears about the racially liminal "savageness" of the working-class and poor whites in the imperial metropole, ideas about non-bourgeois white people as "a race apart." This is the social and cultural milieu in which Rhys' novels are set and which forms the backdrop for her sharp observations about how gendered classicism in against poor white Englishmen is tinged with racial implications. Finally, the early twentieth century also witnessed the rise of mass consumerism and (for white people) all but adversity-less modern lives steeped in technological conveniences and new forms of popular entertainment. Throughout her lectures, essays, and interviews,

Cather bemoaned the ways in which modernity had turned modern bourgeois Americans into utter Philistines and sapped them of any capacity to endure hardship. This disdain for a restless, spoiled, trifling modern bourgeoisie constitutes a large part of the motivation behind her “escapist” frontier novels, chronicling the rustic simplicity and epic endurance of pioneer life.

All of the aforementioned developments destabilized any easy equation of whiteness with a variety of economic and moral virtues, including, as Forter contends, self-reliance but also hard work, benevolence, and the rugged capacity to endure hardship. “Scattered Supremacies” shows how Rhys, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Cather engaged in the racial discourses of their historical moment by exhibiting (or, in Rhys’ case, critiquing) reactionary forms of white racial identity defined by desperate identification with a range of *economically coded and thus seemingly race-neutral* virtues. Rather than locating whiteness in textual displays of primitivism or Orientalism, in white people’s relationships and confrontations with people of color or non-European cultures, or in their self-aggrandizing idealizations of other white people, “Scattered Supremacies” locates it in a range of less obviously racial ideas and practices tethered to seemingly race-neutral virtues like industriousness, hardy austerity, and disciplined self-reliance: in notions of professionalism (Fitzgerald); in stereotypes about the laziness and dishonesty of the white poor (Rhys); in the use of financial rhetoric as a way of conceptualizing wrongdoing and social justice (Faulkner); and in nostalgia for the rugged, supposedly non-materialistic austerity of America’s pioneers (Cather).

In employing these methods of racial analysis, “Scattered Supremacies” echoes and builds upon a few works of whiteness-studies scholarship that *have* sought to call



attention to whiteness' less stark and conventional forms. Chief among these is anthropologist John Hartigan Jr.'s *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (1999), which emphasizes how “*intraracial* distinctions” serve as a primary means by which white people think about and enact their racial identities (17, original emphasis). The intraracial distinctions Hartigan explores are, specifically, class distinctions between whites, which, he argues, often function as discourses of “nonobvious racial significance” (17, 280). In this respect, *Racial Situations* is already a clear model for this dissertation, but “Scattered Supremacies” follows Hartigan’s study in yet another way as well. As the title of his book implies, Hartigan focuses on the ways in which the meaning and significance of race are highly “situational”: he emphasizes, that is, how racial identities are constantly constructed at the individual level of everyday social encounters in addition to the structural level of large-scale institutions. Through an ethnographic method involving interviews with different groups of working-class white people, Hartigan demonstrates how the legibility, meaning, and importance of race in any social situation depends on “the interpretive repertoires” people bring to it: the “terms, descriptions, and figures of speech” used to make judgments that are often highly “provisional,” the backstories and concerns that shape perceptions of one’s own motives and actions as well as those of others (Hartigan 15). The point here is not to suggest that the significance of race in these unstructured and quotidian situations is “more primary, real, or authentic than in other settings (institutions and so on)” (Hartigan, *Racial* 281). But as I noted in the field surveys above, the meaning of race in the history and culture of white people has been overwhelmingly explicated in terms of “institutions,” movements, and other macroscopic (and interracial) articulated structures—anti-abolitionism,

naturalization law, the exclusion of black workers from organized labor, redlining, backlash against Civil Rights initiatives, etc. By calling attention not only to the ways in which whiteness manifests through intraracial class conflicts but also to its rootedness in the vicissitudes of everyday social encounters, *Racial Situations* expands the scope of what counts as “racial” in the social and psychic lives of white people, linking this term to ideas and practices quite different “from what may be assumed in its uses for describing institutional practices or the array of forms of discrimination or stereotyping” (Hartigan 281).

“Scattered Supremacies” shares Hartigan’s focus on forms of whiteness that are intra-racially articulated and less institutional. I do historicize my readings with contextual discussions about large-scale socioeconomic structures and cultural dynamics—the professionalization of the American middle class at turn the of twentieth century in my chapter on Fitzgerald, for instance, or fears about white racial degeneration in European colonies and amongst the working classes of various imperial metropolises in my chapter on Rhys. The focus of my readings themselves, however, is the “interpretive repertoires” that white people use to make judgements about other whites: the terms, descriptions, and (in this literary rather than anthropological project) aesthetic tropes wielded to make sense of, evaluate, and criticize white people, whether these are used by white characters within the plot or in descriptions of white characters at the level of narration.

On the matter of aesthetics, there are certain features of modernist narrative style that make modernist literature an especially rich archive for this dissertation. Modernism is known for a variety of aesthetic trademarks: fragmentary and non-chronological

narrative structures, non-mimetic representation, allusive density and difficulty, abundant use of interior monologue and stream of consciousness, and the intertwinement of conflicting narrative perspectives, just to name a few. Certainly, a number of these aesthetic techniques appear in *some* of chapters of this dissertation and play an important role in the way a certain text illuminates or exhibits a form of white racial discourse. Rhys' extensive use of interior monologue and the unique narrative tone it creates are a key part of my analysis of whiteness in Chapter 1, and in Chapter 4, I argue that the fragmentary, elliptical form of Cather's pioneer fictions are integral to the discourse of whiteness her novels exude.

None of the specific modernist narrative techniques listed above, however, characterizes *every* novel examined in this dissertation. If there is one feature of literary modernism that unites the authors and texts in this study and makes them a particularly rich archive for this project, it is the more general feature of modernism's atmosphere or mood of anxious disillusionment. From *Heart of Darkness* and *The Waste Land* to *Quicksand* and *The Sound and the Fury*, modernism has never been known for a cheery, carefree outlook on life. In both fiction and poetry, much of its representational content is comprised of responses to the downsides of modernity, brooding reflections on the cruelties and moral foundations of colonialism; on the reification of human beings and social relationships in the wake of rationalized, industrial capitalism; on the anomie and social atomization of metropolitan life; and on the traumas of World War I, which revealed mankind's technological capacity to wipe itself out. Modernism's fragmentary and disorienting representational forms work to convey the affective and psychological effects of these historical circumstances: confusion and worry about the breakdown of

long-standing social orders, about a loss of faith in previous moral values and ideals, and the forms of intense *introspection* to which the unwieldy developments of modernity give rise. What we see in much of literary modernism is white people witnessing and processing the moral and cultural degradation of themselves or other white people—white people seeing things that they do not like happening to themselves or to their communities and trying to take actions or come up with rationalizations that allow them to salvage a sense of their own self-regard. Faulkner is an especially illustrative example of this. Many of his novels, like *Absalom! Absalom!* and the Snopes trilogy, take the disorienting, *Heart-of-Darkness*-style form of stories about people telling each other stories: characters dredging up one anecdote or another, chewing on it, fretting over it, trying to figure out what it says or does not say about the South and the Southern whites who are the primary protagonists of Faulkner's fiction. In its ambience of worried self-reflection, modernism is thus especially rife with white people taking stock of their own habits and values, critiquing those of other whites, clinging to a sense of their own virtuousness, and (whether they realize it or not) managing the boundaries and connotations of whiteness by parsing out the “good” white people from the “bad.”

Having now positioned this dissertation within whiteness studies as a field, identifying the works of scholarship to which it is akin in addition to those whose unfinished business it seeks to address, I want to offer one point of clarification about the methods I adopt and the close readings in my chapters. As I hope by now to have made clear, “Scattered Supremacies” works by examining literary representations of white intraracial conflict and illuminating, within these, the racial content of the seemingly race-neutral qualities used by certain white people to criticize and differentiate

themselves from other whites. In doing so, I locate whiteness in ideas, practices, tropes, and structures of feeling that do not revolve around white people explicitly stigmatizing people of color or idolizing other whites. This being said, there *are* occasional moments in the course of these chapters, where my analysis turns to textual scenes defined by a white character's interaction with or discussion of, say, a black person. There is one such moment in my chapter on Rhys, for instance, and two of them in my chapter on Faulkner. What I want to point out here is that, as I have tried to show at length, for most of the extant literary scholarship on whiteness, the appearance in a text of characters of color or tropes of blackness or Asian-ness or blatant pronouncements of white cultural superiority are the *main* point of the analysis, the predominant form of evidence cited to back the critic's claims. This dissertation is not utterly and completely free of such moments as discussion topics, but they are extremely rare, and I use them only as occasional forms of racial "reassurance." For example, my chapter on Faulkner, reads whiteness in terms of how Faulkner conceptualizes moral and material debt and how he uses metaphors of indebtedness and debt repayment to structure the plot and narration of a novel. Brief discussions of two moments where black characters use the language of debt in their encounters with white people serve as useful ways to "reassure" us that debt and indebtedness are racialized categories in Faulkner's moral and aesthetic universe. The point of the chapter, however, is to read ideas about debt as facets of white racial identity *throughout* the novel in question. The scenes where black characters enter the picture are simply the parts of the text where racial identities are being more obviously constructed through financial rhetoric, but the entire novel is racialized in this way, and my chapter

reflects this by devoting almost all of its close-reading space to the novel's *intraracial* plotlines.

#### **IV. Race in “Scattered Supremacies” Part II: Modernism and Neoliberalism**

I want to turn now to the final component of this dissertation's racial framework, one that moves us to the question of contemporary relevance. In addition to expanding the limited racial optics of both modernist and whiteness studies, my focus on forms of whiteness coded through seemingly race-neutral economic and moral virtues allows “Scattered Supremacies” to achieve one other goal: illuminating white racial dynamics that resonate specifically with the forms of racialization dominant under contemporary neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has become, in recent decades, a buzzword in academic circles. It describes a political and economic ideology birthed, primarily, in the United States and Britain in the 1970s and 1980s and later dispersed, through economic imperialism, across the globe. As David Harvey writes, it “is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (2).<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the two processes most characteristic of neoliberal reform are privatization and deregulation. Because neoliberal theory holds that a competitive free market is the most effective way to meet society's needs and right its ills, “[s]ectors formerly run or regulated by the state must be turned over to the private sphere and be

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of neoliberalism's historical origins and its uneven uptake in different national and geographical contexts, see Harvey 5-63.

deregulated (freed from any state interference)” (Harvey 65). The rollback of the welfare state is thus a prime example of neoliberal governance. Under the alibi of financial efficiency and the need to discipline “lazy” individuals, the provisioning of welfare has become increasingly localized and marked by harsh work requirements forcing those seeking benefits to accept any and all work in a deregulated (and thus hyper-exploitative) labor market. Neoliberalism is also marked by a blinkered faith in individualism, one that consistently obscures structural forms of oppression as an explanation of inequality. “Individual success[es] or failure[s] are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one’s own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property” (Harvey 65-66). As this brief summary suggests, neoliberal governance, in its concern for unregulated market enterprise and its willful ignorance of any sense of systemic oppression, has ultimately functioned, as Harvey argues, as a political project “to restore the power of economic elites,” a set of rules about how to govern that works for the haves and not for the have nots (19). Thus, one of the prevailing outcomes of neoliberal reforms in past decades has been an ever-widening income gap between the rich and the poor in countries across the globe (Harvey 16-18).

For the purposes of “Scattered Supremacies,” what is most important about neoliberalism in the late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first centuries is the way it has affected the structures and expressions of white supremacy. Insofar as neoliberal politico-economic structures have restored the power of economic elites, they have worked in favor of white racial dominance. However, because neoliberalism also seeks to deny the realities of systemic oppression, insisting that free markets and the societies built around

them are level playing fields, it has also been accompanied by cultural shifts in how racial inequality and white supremacy are talked about and explained, shifts that work, namely, to *deny* that race is a meaningful category for making sense of social disparities.

“Neoliberalism was at its core a racial project as much as a capitalist accumulation project,” observe Michael Omi and Howard Winant, and “[i]ts central racial component was *colorblind* racial ideology” (211, emphasis added). In his definitive study on colorblind racism in the United States, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes it as a “new racial ideology” cohering “in the late 1960s” and consisting of explanations used by white people to rationalize and justify racial inequality through recourse to “market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (2). As Bonilla-Silva points out, colorblind racism has always—like neoliberalism—had a politically liberal persuasion: it “rearticulate[s] elements of traditional liberalism (work ethic, rewards by merit, equal opportunity, individualism, etc.)” in order “to rationalize racially unfair situations” (7, 56). In its colorblind form, American white supremacy is buttressed not by outmoded claims about the sheer biological inferiority of people of color but by claims about problematic aspects of the latter’s character *as individuals* or about the habits and values instilled by their own families and communities. If black Americans tend to be poorer than whites, this is because they have failed to work hard enough (the colorblind reasoning goes) in a country that, at least since the end of slavery and Jim Crow, really is a meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva 60-61). This is supposedly exacerbated by unstable family structures in black communities and a general lack of regard for disciplined work ethic in black culture (Bonilla-Silva 67-70).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These insights all come from Bonilla-Silva’s seminal study *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism*



What I have been describing, above, as the “seemingly race-neutral economic and moral virtues” key to this dissertation’s analysis—virtues like industriousness, self-discipline, austerity, and self-reliance—are thus crucial to the vocabularies and patterns of reasoning characteristic of the colorblind forms of white supremacy now rampant under neoliberalism. In addition, then, to providing new readings of modernist literature by tracking previously underexamined discourses of whiteness, this dissertation also bolsters contemporary anti-white-supremacist critique by developing our eye and ear for oblique forms of white supremacy akin to those pervading our historical present, ones channeled not through unabashed convictions of white racial superiority but through the espousal and valorization of classically liberal, meritocratic values.

There are, as it turns out, a few historical reasons why modernist literature is especially well-suited for this task. First, “laissez-faire” approaches to economics and the Adam-Smith-based idea of “free markets” led by an “invisible hand” were very much regnant in the modernist period (along with the first signs of a worried critique of such thinking and practice) (Mickalites 16). These libertarian ideas of classical economics,

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*and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (2018), originally published in 2003 and now in its fifth edition. While Bonilla-Silva does not explicitly identify his book as a work of whiteness studies, I would argue that we could consider it as informally belonging to the field. As Bonilla-Silva explicitly states, “my focus is examining whites’ racial ideology,” and the observations throughout the book are based on an archive of sociological interviews with white people (10). I bring this up as a final opportunity to illustrate the extent of the oversights that have permeated scholarship on race as a factor in the lives of white people (whether formally part of whiteness studies or not). In Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6—the heart of Bonilla-Silva’s study, where he distills and anatomizes the key components of colorblind racial ideology—Bonilla-Silva relies, as evidence for his claims, on the opinions white people expressed in interviews about a variety of *explicitly* racial topics, including but not limited to: affirmative action; de facto housing and school segregation; interracial friendship, dating, and marriage; differences experienced between white people and people of color when engaging with the U.S. court system and the police; reparations; government-aid programs that specifically cater to certain racial groups; and gaps in academic achievement, employment, income, and wealth between black and white Americans (59-141). In explicating colorblind racism as a key feature of white racial ideology, in other words, Bonilla-Silva’s study conforms to the patterns in modernist and whiteness studies in which observations about whiteness are constantly tied to white people’s relationships to or ideas about blackness.

very strong from the 1900s to the 1930s, are the historical basis on which neoliberals drew, beginning in the 1970s, to generate a consensus around the pursuit of market-based solutions to social problems. In terms of general politico-economic, ideological atmospheres, then, there is a historical resonance between the turn of the twentieth century and the turn of the twenty-first (separated by the mid-century ascendancy of statist, New-Deal and Keynesian economic paradigms). More specifically, the early twentieth century also witnessed the rise of particular economic practices and institutions now considered characteristically neoliberal. Financial capitalism, for example, is a key component of neoliberal economics, but financialization first became a major part of modern capital accumulation in the late nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries. Faulkner's Snopes trilogy registers this economic development by making its primary antagonist, Flem Snopes, a shady financier whose business machinations and predatory lending wreak havoc on a small community. The same historical moment also witnessed the "professionalization" of the American and British bourgeoisie: the rise of a special class of workers who claimed privileged positions in occupational and social hierarchies by garnering public recognition for credentialed expertise acquired through an elite education. In *Tender is the Night* and nonfiction writings contemporaneous with it, the language and values of professionalism are crucial to the way Fitzgerald attempts to distinguish himself from the American leisure class whose decadence he viewed as the source of both America's decline in the 1930s and his own.

In certain chapters of "Scattered Supremacies," then, there are economic dynamics present as part of the fiction's context and/or content that allow us to read these literary texts as cultural responses to early-twentieth-century socioeconomic discourses

that have since become even more prominent in our neoliberal present. This “proto-neoliberal” connection is not equally present across all chapters. It is strongest in the case of Faulkner, followed by Fitzgerald. In my chapter on Rhys, it is not true that there is a specific, neoliberally resonant economic discourse shaping the context or storylines of Rhys’ texts. I do, however, suggest at the end of the chapter that the insights from my close readings—about how British imperial white supremacy is shored up by stigmatizing the nation’s white poor—are especially relevant to thinking about the racial dimensions of neoliberal reforms of the welfare state. The connection is weakest in my chapter on Cather, where I spend the least amount of time drawing links between Cather’s texts and any particular neoliberal discourse. Regardless, however, of whether the contemporary relevance of any given chapter’s racial analysis can be expressed in terms of a *specific* neoliberal discourse or institution, *every* chapter of “Scattered Supremacies” illustrates that in the modernist period no less than in our own, discourses about hard work, debt, discipline, and self-reliance generated vocabularies and logics that shored up white supremacy despite a lack of overtly racial content—not unlike the forms of colorblind racism supposedly unique to our post-Civil-Rights, neoliberal moment. My focus is on showing how whiteness can be constructed through seemingly nonracial ideas and practices. Where it is possible to do this in a way that crystallizes the stakes of a reading in terms of a discretely nameable economic discourse operative today, I do so. But even in chapters where this not quite possible, the forms of tacitly racial discourse I identify should be understood as timely objects of study given the broader, neoliberal reality of a colorblind racial order in which economic language and values are

increasingly utilized (whether consciously or not) as racially unmarked vehicles for conveying what are in fact racially charged judgments.

Just to make one point clear: we should not mistake the advent of Trump and the blunter, more brazen forms of white supremacy he has enabled as signs that we are no longer living in a world structured by neoliberal political and economic imperatives and colorblind forms of racial discourse. Though Trump and his supporters are obviously not “liberals,” his administration still adopts a politically and economically neoliberal policy orientation while blending this with right-wing cultural and moral values. David Harvey calls this “neoconservatism.” Neoconservatives, like neoliberals, favor corporate power and private enterprise and are “entirely consistent with the neoliberal agenda of elite governance, mistrust of democracy, and the maintenance of market freedoms” (Harvey 82). Hence, for instance, Trump’s settler-colonial fast tracking of the Dakota Access Pipeline, a move marked by the neoliberal imperatives of privatization and deregulation. Likewise, neoconservatives “in no way depart from the neoliberal agenda of a construction or restoration of a dominant class power”; they “seek legitimacy for that power, as well as social control through construction of a climate of consent” centered around conservative moral values (Harvey 83-84). Thus, they “emphasize militarization as an antidote to the chaos of individual interests,” are “more likely to highlight threats, real or imagined, ... to the integrity and stability of the nation,” and champion moral values centered on “cultural nationalism, ... Christianity (of a certain evangelical sort), family values, ... right-to-life issues, and on antagonism to the new social movements such as feminism, gay rights, affirmative action, and environmentalism” (82, 84). These are the contours of America under Trump’s Republican administration to a tee, and the

point, again, is that such conservatism exists alongside a neoliberal ideology that champions corporations, capitalist enterprise, and a religion of entrepreneurial individualism completely oblivious to history and systemic inequality.

As far as the continuation of colorblind racism is concerned, I can do no better than quote Bonilla-Silva in his 2018 Preface to a revised edition of his definitive work on colorblindness, *Racism without Racists*. The Trump moment, Bonilla-Silva notes, does not represent the end of colorblind racism so much as illustrate how any system of racial oppression “articulate[s] various modes of domination” (xiv). There are, under Trump’s shadow, many overt white supremacists who now feel emboldened to crawl out of the woodwork. But these right-wing extremists exist *alongside* white moderates and less-far-right conservatives who do not espouse ideas about white racial superiority yet maintain that “the past is past” and that racial inequality persists in America not because of systemic oppression but because of people of color and their allies, who “make” everything about race when it really isn’t. Colorblindness, in other words, remains a prominent feature of American white supremacy, even if “it is not the *only* way of maintaining racial order” (Bonilla-Silva xiv, original emphasis).

## V. Chapter Overviews

“Scattered Supremacies” contains four chapters, each dealing with a single author. Chapter 1, “Devastatingly English: Locating Race in Jean Rhys’ Non-Caribbean Fiction,” illuminates the operations of whiteness in two novels critics tend to read as texts about gender rather than race: *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* and *Good Morning Midnight*. I argue that Rhys’ portrayals of the stigma faced by poor white Englishwomen in the

imperial metropole reveals the inextricability of these gendered forms of classism with the racial discourses of British colonial rule. Historically, anxieties about white racial degeneration in the European colonies led to forms of white intra-racial class policing that stigmatized poor whites, even in the metropole, as racially liminal. This intra-racial dynamic, I argue, structures the lives of Rhys' white characters. I track the ways in which Rhys herself signals the racial dimensions of her protagonists' marginalization at the level of plot, and I then turn to an extensive analysis of her form and style, showing how she encoded, within her tone and use of the second-person voice, discourses of resistance to the forms of white-supremacist, gendered classicism depicted in the story. The chapter concludes by identifying echoes of the intra-racial class discourses critiqued by Rhys' fiction in the racial dynamics of British neoliberal welfare reform.

Chapter 2, "'Owing Nothing to Any Man': Faulkner, White Debt, and the Language of Moral Finance," examines the discourse of "moral debt" that frames ideas about wrongdoing and justice in *The Mansion*, a novel with almost black characters, centered around the class conflict between a white tenant farmer and a white banker. In the 1940s and 1950s, Faulkner was highly critical of the early-twentieth-century welfare state, which he viewed as detrimental to an ethos of self-made independence that he imagined as characteristic of white masculinity. Faulkner's obsession with self-made individualism permeates *The Mansion's* discourse of moral debt, a set of both plot- and narration-structuring ideas about what it means to "owe" atonement for past wrongs and what atonement and its aftermath might look like. I focus on two specific elements of Faulkner's moral-debt rhetoric: a constant fixation on historical closure (on the settling past of injustices as "closed chapters" in history) and the anticipation of unencumbered

individualism as the automatic payoff of facing one's moral dues. I argue that these two tendencies comprise a distinctly white way of thinking about moral indebtedness, one that caters to the historical and emotional interests of white people and that still lives on today in contemporary debates about "white debt" and reparations to African Americans and indigenous people.

Chapter 3, "Your Own Worst Critic: Whiteness as Professionalism in Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*," contends that Fitzgerald's semiautobiographical novel exhibits a distinctly white model of self-consciously "professional" identity, one distinguished by an anxious combination of insecurity about lifelong economic comforts that may have made one soft and a compensatory desire to be viewed as a hard-working individual devoted to a selfless career of service to others. This chapter's thinking about whiteness is organized under the rubric of earnest yet imperfect auto-critique. In tracking the simultaneously self-critical yet self-aggrandizing tendencies of Fitzgerald's professional anxieties, I illuminate a manifestation of whiteness defined neither by overt racism against people of color nor uncritical valorizations of white identity but rather by a self-conscious fixation on reconciling one's elite social and economic standing with fetishized notions of moral innocence and uprightness. I discuss this white professionalism in relation to the historical context of Jazz-Age abundance (where the spoiled American leisure class serves as Fitzgerald's scapegoat for highlighting his beneficent, hard-working protagonist's virtues) and in relation to scholarship on professionalization as an economic process at the turn of the twentieth century and professionalism as a contemporary, neoliberal power structure.

Chapter 4, “‘Something that spoke of race’: Whiteness and Settler Moves to Innocence in the Novels of Willa Cather,” attends to the ways in which settler colonialism informs white racial identity. Reading a number of historical novels set on unsettled, North American frontiers, I show how Cather’s nostalgic representations of bygone white settlers work to showcase a variety of pioneer virtues, including a disinterested, humbly anti-materialistic relationship to property accumulation and an epic capacity to endure adversity and loss. I argue that Cather’s novelistic preoccupation with the embattled, resilient, austere lives of white pioneers stemmed from a desire to re-associate whiteness with the admirable, gorgeously humble capacity to endure hardship—an economically coded and thus seemingly race-neutral virtue from which whiteness was being increasingly severed by industrial and technological advances in the early twentieth century. To make this claim, I preface my reading of Cather’s novels with a detailed discussion of her nonfiction, which relentlessly criticized the forces of industrialism and commercialization for creating a modern bourgeoisie bereft of the refinement and substance of character that can only come from mettle-toughening exposure to hardship. Faced with a modern America whose middle-class whites had devolved into vessels of a spoiled, trifling, Philistine form of whiteness, Cather, I argue, retreated through her fiction to the spectacle of a bygone whiteness still marked by principled idealism and mental and spiritual fortitude. In doing so, she takes for granted settler access to the *land* on which these white, pioneer virtues play out and thus exhibits a form of whiteness that is deeply entangled with the history and practices of settler colonialism.



Having laid out this dissertation's framework and described its chapters, I want to close with one final clarification. In identifying oblique and often unwitting forms of white supremacy in the work of writers like Faulkner, Cather, and Fitzgerald, I want to be clear that it is not my intention to vilify these novelists as "bad" people. One of the more insidious effects of the Trump presidency is that it has given non-conservative white people something easy to point at and say, "I'm not that, so I'm not a racist." The stakes of this dissertation are especially high, in other words, in a political climate where responsibility for white supremacy is increasingly shunted onto "Trump supporters" despite much of its perpetuation continuing to occur through the insufficiently self-critical practices of white liberals. As whiteness-studies scholars like Matthew Hughey and Shannon Sullivan have argued, one of the biggest obstacles to dismantling white supremacy today is the all-too-easy and misleading "good white liberal"/"bad white racist" binary in which progressive whites mitigate or shield themselves from any sense of their ongoing complicity in structures of racial oppression by demonizing the actions and views of white conservatives. This does not help people of color in any way and in fact just contributes to their oppression by forcing them to stomach the blinkered self-aggrandizing of supposed "allies." It would be historically and biographically inaccurate to say that any of the authors in this study were trying to be better "allies" to people of color. They were not invested in disrupting systems of racial oppression so much as they were either (in Rhys's case) trying to survive forms of stigma that accrue to some white people as a part of white-supremacist power structures or (in Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Cather's case) fretting over changing habits and values that threatened to jeopardize their own idealized self-image or that of the classes or communities to which they belonged.

These sociocultural situations are expressed and navigated, in these modernist novels, through white people criticizing other whites in ways that ultimately do not dismantle whiteness as a privileged racial category so much as police its boundaries and/or rehabilitate it where it is perceived to be in decline. Rather than holding figures like Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Cather at a distance and vilifying their prejudices, I aim to hold their work up like a mirror and encourage us to recognize, in the shortcomings of their racial optics, ideological and affective tendencies that still plague white critiques of whiteness today (particularly those coming from the liberal bourgeoisie). By focusing on forms of whiteness distinguished less by racist ideas about people of color than by problematically structured critiques of other whites, “Scattered Supremacies” aims to disrupt any sense of a “good white liberal”/“bad white racist” binary, inviting us to see ourselves in these writers and learn from the example of their racialized affective and aesthetic reflexes rather than feel sentimentally good about critiquing them.

As John Hartigan Jr. observes at the end of *Racial Situations*, “The point of producing racial knowledge” is to detail “the process of racialization, whether whites or people of color are its immediate subjects,” and to create, in doing so, “a basis for comprehending when, how, and if certain dynamics are racial, especially in situations where ‘race’ is not ostensibly present” (286). These, precisely, are the theoretical and methodological investments of the literary analyses that follow. We will not have a comprehensive critique of the ways in which white people perpetuate their racial dominance until we recognize—*alongside* the many direct and spectacular forms of racial oppression so invaluable analyzed by other scholars—the subtler, more *indirect* forms of white supremacy scattered throughout white people’s intra-racial interactions and their

textual representations of one another. This dissertation endeavors to make some initial strides toward that goal.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Devastatingly English: Locating Race in Jean Rhys' Non-Caribbean Fiction**

In the course of her wanderings around Paris in 1937, Sasha Jensen, the impoverished, English protagonist of Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), befriends a gigolo named René of self-professed “French-Canadian” origin (74). When he asks, as a fellow down-and-out émigré, whether she has made any other friends in the city, Sasha replies that she has recently met two Russians whom she likes very much. “‘Russians,’ he says in a spiteful voice, ‘Russians in Paris! Everybody knows what they are – Jews and poor whites. The most boring people in the world’” (163). During the 1930s, perceptions of “the Jew as a working class immigrant who threatened the racial purity of the nation” were a prominent feature of French national culture, especially among the nation’s native-born, white working class (Stovall 63). René’s hostility toward Jews, however, cannot be explained in terms of a nativist antipathy toward immigrants, given that he himself is an émigré. Nor can it be explained in terms of resenting competition for scarce industrial wage labor since René, as a gigolo, is not looking for such employment. Rhys provides a clue to the motives and reasoning behind his comment through the second group he names for censure. By instinctively lumping “poor whites” together with the racially stigmatized category of Jews, René insinuates that the former group’s lack of bourgeois habits and values makes them, in fact, racially liminal: that the poorness of poor whites renders their whiteness suspect. Through René’s knee-jerk prejudice, Rhys calls attention to how judgments about the racial identity of a group

or an individual are informed by judgments about the possession or lack of certain class-based characteristics.

Rhys bears this point out further by showing how René tries to use the intertwinement of race and class to his own advantage. Later in their conversation, he tells Sasha about some of the lavish mansions he has seen while servicing wealthy clientele: “‘I’ve stayed in one so rich that when you pulled the lavatory-plug it played a tune. ... Rich people – you have to be sorry for them. They haven’t the slightest idea how to spend their money [...]. Either they have no taste at all, or, if they have any taste, it’s like a mausoleum and they’re shut up in it’” (Rhys, *Midnight* 169).<sup>1</sup> In this critique of the wealthy, René is not implying a plucky preference for rags over riches. He obviously seeks out only affluent clients, and he considers his own taste cultivated enough to critique their tastes as gaudy and their ideas about leisure as dry. René, in other words, *affects* a bourgeois comportment above his actual means, a tendency he has already exhibited by branding Jews and poor whites as uncouthly “boring.” That earlier comment has already hinted that René’s bourgeois posturing harbors racial motivations, and Rhys confirms this more clearly when, in a forlorn bid for Sasha’s attention and intimacy, René shows her the traces of a failed suicide attempt, a scar running from ear to ear across his neck. “He looks sad. He says, speaking in a low voice and for the first time with a very strong accent: ‘I have wounds,’ pronouncing ‘wounds’ so oddly that I don’t understand what he means” (174). Whatever the accent on René’s English may be, it does not seem to be French, which Sasha would recognize, and this renders his claim of French-Canadian origin dubious. The likelihood that René is not Western European, perhaps not

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<sup>1</sup> Rhys frequently uses ellipses in her own writing. In this chapter, I indicate omissions from quoted material by placing my own ellipses in brackets. Unbracketed ellipses are Rhys’ in the original.

European at all, brings the significance of his earlier, classist anti-Semitism more clearly into focus: by branding Jews and poor whites as “boring,” and by claiming the sense and sophistication to criticize the tastes of the rich, René whitewashes his own racially ambiguous background by consciously pretending to bourgeois status. He attempts to attenuate his racial liminality—to shore up his tenuous belonging within the French imperial metropole—using the ideas and language of class.

In this chapter, I show that in *Good Morning, Midnight* as well as in Rhys’ second novel *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), class-based ideas and practices serve as the basis both for judgments about the racial identities of individuals and for attempts by racially liminal subjects to pass as members of a dominant racial group. René’s comment about Jews and poor whites along with his bourgeois affectations exemplify these dynamics, but he also stands as a rather exceptional case because his flagrant anti-Semitism makes the racial implications of his classed self-presentation hard to miss. By contrast, most of the racially charged classism I examine in this chapter is devoid of overt racism and often of any references to race at all. Both Sasha and the protagonist of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Julia Martin, live unwed, unemployed, itinerant lives being financially kept by middle-class English men seeking casual sexual companionship for compensation in cash or kind.<sup>2</sup> This mode of survival exposes Sasha and Julia to patronizing forms of gendered class discrimination both from their bourgeois English relatives and from their lovers and ex-lovers themselves. I argue, however, that the misogynistic classism faced by Rhys’ protagonists also bears tacit racial implications

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<sup>2</sup> Though *Midnight* and parts of *Mackenzie* are set in Paris, Rhys’ narratives still tend to focus on interactions that Sasha and Julia have with men who are English. These may be ex-lovers or new lovers traveling or living in Paris, or they may be Englishmen who are recalled in London-based memories.

because it is deeply tied to the racial discourses of British colonial rule. Historically, the subjugation of colonized populations abroad and of poor English women at home relied upon a shared set of tropes—idleness, dependency, and irrational emotionality—which implied the inferiority of both groups to middle-class English men. Within this matrix of imperialist discourse, “Englishness” as a thoroughly racialized national identity was predicated on the display of bourgeois values and decorum, a nationally specific form of whiteness constructed through economically coded and thus seemingly race-neutral terms. Sasha and Julia’s indecent domestic and sexual arrangements, along with their ostensible lack of self-discipline and work ethic, lead to their marginalization along lines of class and gender, but Rhys also shows how their non-bourgeois habits and values occasion a precarious relationship to Englishness, a racial liminality that, like René, they often try to offset by acting more bourgeois than their material circumstances allow. My claim here is not that these white Englishwomen are victims of racism. They are victims of classism, but the white-on-white class prejudice they face draws upon and feeds into the racial logics of British colonial rule.

Thus, in *Midnight* and *Mackenzie*, Rhys calls attention to how ideas and practices that underwrite the racial domination of colonized nonwhites are subtly yet pervasively rehearsed in judgments and interactions that do not appear to be racial because they occur between different classes of white people. As John Hartigan Jr. notes in his study of how the racial category “white trash” is produced as a rhetorical weapon through discourses of class, gender, and sexuality, “the fact of racism does not explain everything about how and why race matters” (*Odd Tribes* 7). Overreliance on it as an explanatory principle can obscure from analysis ideas and practices that contribute to the formation of hierarchized

racial identities in more nuanced and indirect ways. Sasha and Julia's marginalization by the patriarchal, imperial-metropolitan English bourgeoisie singles out and distances those who "exceed the class and [sexual] etiquettes required by whites if they are to preserve the powers and privileges that accrue to them as members of the dominant racial order" (Hartigan 115). This specific process does not directly involve people of color, but it still bears racial stakes and illustrates the importance of including the interactions that different groups of white people have with each other within the ambit of studies about race, colonialism, and white supremacy.

This crucial point has been undervalued in Rhys scholarship. Whenever race and empire are topics of analysis, Rhys' critics tend to focus on her two most famous texts, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) (Emery; V. Gregg; Raiskin; Thomas; Clarke; Burrows; Eeva). Both novels include numerous scenes or memories set in the colonial space of the British Caribbean and feature female protagonists who are also white "Creoles": people of "European descent born in European colonies" and, in the case of those born in British colonial territories, bearing "cultural ties to England fostered either by the self-identifications of settler societies or by Anglocentric colonial educations" (Raiskin 3, 1).<sup>3</sup> *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* offer conspicuous examples of the racist fetishization of Afro-Caribbeans by white Creoles as well as the stigmatization of both groups in turn by the metropolitan English. By contrast, novels like *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* and *Good Morning, Midnight* focus on the relationships their poor, Englishwomen protagonists have with other metropolitan

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<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the term of "Creole" varies widely across historical and geographic contexts. For a discussion of these variations, along with the term's etymology, see Raiskin 1-5. Throughout this chapter, I use "Creole" (usually qualified with the adjective "white") to denote people of European ancestry born and raised in a European colony.



Europeans. Thus, *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* tend to be read as novels about women's impoverishment more so than novels about racial and colonial dynamics due to the relative absence of narrative content that features overt racism or interracial social contact.<sup>4</sup> The tendency to view Rhys' Caribbean fiction as clearly concerned with race and her metropolitan fiction as focused on gender reflects an understandable yet limiting inclination on behalf of critics to look for white supremacy solely in the interactions that white people have with nonwhites or in the ideas and conversations that white people have about them. However, Rhys' own childhood as a white colonist in the British Caribbean, as well as her young adulthood as a poor colonial émigré in London, made her intimately familiar with the prejudices held by England's metropolitan bourgeoisie both against white Creoles believed to be morally and physically inferior due to their upbringing in the savage outposts of civilization and against the metropolitan white poor as a veritable race apart from the English middle class.<sup>5</sup> Throughout her fiction, Rhys exhibited a keen sensitivity to the ways in which the constitution of an English race fit for imperial rule required the subjugation of some whites by other whites, particularly through classist and misogynistic discourses about work, self-discipline, sex, and domesticity. Her metropolitan fiction is thus an optimal archive for illustrating the arguments and stakes of this dissertation.

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<sup>4</sup> There are of course exceptions to this trend. Of the critics cited here, some—like Emery, Gregg, and Thomas—certainly include *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* in their studies of the racial and colonial themes in Rhys' work. The amount of attention these texts receive relative to *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, is often meager, and when *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* are being read, race tends to recede into the background of analysis where it was otherwise front and center throughout the critic's study. For an indicative, state-of-field report on this scholarship-induced split between Rhys' Caribbean and non-Caribbean fiction, with the former tending to serve as the almost exclusive domain for questions about race and empire, see Dell'Amico 1-5.

<sup>5</sup> On the biographical details of Rhys' Creole upbringing and her experiences with racial and class prejudice in the English imperial metropole, see Angier, especially 1-35.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. Part I begins with a brief sketch of the gendered forms of class discrimination that pervade *Midnight* and *Mackenzie*, stressing the language and common-sense reasoning wielded by middle-class Englishmen to stigmatize Rhys' protagonists. I then turn to scholarship in colonial discourse studies showing how the cultivation of European bourgeois identity in the metropole was informed by racial discourses developed in the colonies. In imperial nation-states like Britain, the cultural standards of what it meant to be English and bourgeois were never separable from discourses of empire, from "reference points of difference" embodied both in the colonized and in déclassé European colonists who "provided contrasts for what a 'healthy, vigorous, bourgeois body' was all about" (Stoler 7). On this basis, I argue that the misogynistic classism endured by Rhys' protagonists bears tacit racial implications. In the chapter's second section, I show how Rhys' novels not only portray this racially marked classism but also resist it. I argue that the tone and style of her writing pinpoint the many contradictions and hypocrisies of bourgeois class condescension and force implied, middle-class readers into anxious self-consciousness about perpetuating them. The chapter's concluding section considers the relevance of these readings to the contemporary moment. I suggest that the insights gained from reading *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* are especially valuable now, in the context of the work-enforcing welfare reforms rapidly transpiring under neoliberalism.

## I

In one of many flashbacks throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha recalls a stranger buying her drinks in hopes of getting her into bed. In a blithely misogynistic

effort to establish a rapport, the man begins to read her a letter he has recently received from another girl with whom he is having casual sex. This woman has started asking him for money to buy new shoes because her own are all worn out. “‘I don’t believe it,’ he says, ‘it’s a trap. This girl, you understand, is a liar. What she wants is three hundred francs to give to her maquereau [her pimp]’” (88). He then invites Sasha to join him in impugning the girl’s request: “‘Well, what do you think? Do you think this letter can be genuine?’” (89). Sasha’s opinion, of course, does not really matter, for as he quickly reasons of his own accord, “‘even if it is genuine, I mustn’t send the money at once. [...] If she thought she had only to ask, to have – that would never do. No, no, I must keep her waiting’” (89). Ultimately, this point, too, is rendered moot, for he soon decides he will not give her any money after all: “‘No. I think she is lying’” (89).

Throughout both *Midnight* and *Mackenzie*, Rhys bears witness to countless instances of quotidian, classed and gendered aggression. Occasionally, the hostility borne by her protagonists assumes intensely physical forms (*Midnight*, for instance, culminates in a rape scene). But as in the case of the flashback above, Rhys devotes most of her attention in these novels to forms of patriarchal classicism that are more attritional and mundane, ones that typically involve middle-class men’s paternalistic ideas about “reasonable” and “proper” conduct. Sexist classism, in other words, most often figures in these texts as an ambient condition rather than a spectacular event, and Rhys pays keen attention to the rhetoric, terms, and often faulty patterns of reasoning that contribute to her protagonists’ oppression. The man at the bar in Sasha’s anecdote, for example, marshals two stereotypes about the poor (and especially about poor women) to make sense of a bothersome situation before him: the girl, allegedly, is both manipulatively

dishonest and a lazy scrounger. She is supposedly undeserving of support because her presumed lies indicate that she is less needy than she seems, yet, as Sasha notes in her role as narrator, this reasoning makes no sense: “if you’re determined to get people on the cheap, you shouldn’t be so surprised when they pitch you their own little story of misery” (90). Recourse to lies, in other words, would naturally scale as one’s circumstances became more dire, so *if* this girl is lying, this is likely to indicate that her material needs are *more* genuine, not less. From the man’s blinkered perspective, however, she is as dependent as a child, and what she needs is some discipline (“If she thought she had only to ask, to have – that would never do”).

Rhys’ representations of gendered class condescension thus emphasize what we might call the “common sense” reasoning that underwrites it. She captures, that is, the “unsystematized, inconsistent, and contradictory” ideas instinctively wielded by bourgeois men to frame, interpret, and discount the struggles of impoverished women (Lawrence 79). Rhys’ depiction of Julia Martin’s most recent ex-lover in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* is equally exemplary in this regard. The novel’s eponymous, bourgeois Englishman is likewise in the habit of soliciting poor women for casual sex, and they, too, solicit him in turn for cash or kind support he is unwilling to give. In order to deal with this, Mr. Mackenzie adheres to a common-sense “code of morals and manners” improvised from one-sided takes on past experience (*Mackenzie* 24).

He soon stopped asking intimate questions, because he knew that it was a mistake to be too curious about people who drift into your life and must soon inevitably drift out again. That wasn’t the way to live.

The secret to life was never to go too far or too deep. And so you left these people alone. They would be pretty certain to tell you lies, anyhow. And they had their own ways of getting along, don’t you worry. (*Mackenzie* 26)

Foremost among Mr. Mackenzie's rules for interacting with poor women is a strict self-restraint when it comes to intimacy and emotional connection. Echoing the tropes and language deployed by the man in Sasha's anecdote, the poor do not deserve sympathy, here, because they lie about (read: exaggerate) their troubles. These lies imply their laziness, for they are clearly trying to get others to help them when they have "their own ways of getting along."

Such paternalistic tropes and language particularly structure Mackenzie's thoughts about Julia, whom he has just cut sexually and financially out of his life. "[L]iving on the money given to her by various men" had obviously "become a habit," he reflects (26).

He merely asked himself, as a man of the world, "Does she, or does she not, get away with it?" [...] The really incredible thing was that she did not seem to want to get away with it [...]. He knew, for instance, that she had not a penny of her own. After all that time she had not saved a penny.

Almost he was forced to believe that she was a female without the instinct of self-preservation. And it was against Mr. Mackenzie's code to believe that any female existed without a sense of self-preservation.

She was irresponsible. She had fits of melancholy when she would lose the self-control necessary to keep appearances. (26-27)

Lack of self-discipline, in this account, is Julia's defining characteristic. If she had "self-control," she would not only save face by maintaining her composure but also be less "irresponsible" with money. With no discipline or "instinct of self-preservation," she is prone to dependency and emotional "fits," and the assumption that most women *do* have an instinct for self-preservation is hardly less sexist, for it gestures toward a notion not of industrious feminine mettle but of petty feminine wiles—a notion not uncommon amongst the bourgeoisie in Rhys' fiction ("This girl, you understand, is a liar").

If *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* seem so deeply preoccupied with gendered forms of class discrimination, then in what sense do these novels have anything to do with race? Despite the tendency in Rhys criticism to see race only or primarily at stake in texts like *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a few critics have offered accounts of racial and colonial dynamics in *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* as well. These readings have made crucial headway in dispelling the impression that race and empire are features only of the Caribbean portion of Rhys' oeuvre, but they have also been marked by a number of limitations. One approach has been to show that Afro-Caribbean motifs such as zombies or carnivalesque masquerade inform the language and imagery even of Rhys' metropolitan fiction (Emery 122-172; Thomas 83-84). This elucidates how *Rhys'* background as a white Creole shapes all of her texts, but it does not tell us anything about the racial status of her non-Creole English protagonists. Other critics focus on allusions to colonial spaces and figures to suggest that Rhys drew parallels between the alienation of poor metropolitan Englishwomen and the subjugation of the colonized. This often involves focusing on a scene in *Mackenzie* where Julia's sister Norah is reading a passage from Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* and identifies with the character of a slave girl in East Borneo (Abravanel; Dell'Amico 81-95). This approach too easily treats racism and sexism as analogous forms of oppression, reducing the former to a metaphor for the latter.<sup>6</sup> Such analogies obscure specificities of geographic and historical context as well

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<sup>6</sup> Here are a few illustrative lines from Abravanel's Fanon-inspired reading of *Mackenzie*: "Rhys's depiction of gendered alienation *strongly resembles* racial alienation as envisioned by Fanon"; "Fanon's work allows us to see that Rhys's tropes and images *could easily come from* a racist representation of the body"; "Rhys's vision of female oppression also harbors elements that *could well be transposed* from a racial economy of power" (94, emphases added). Abravanel recognizes that this framework can be reductive and problematic but continues to insist on her main argument after acknowledging that limitation as such, hence the closing lines of the essay: "Rhys uses racial imagery and colonial themes to illuminate the psychic distress of English women. While such a transposition may falter in its easy exchange of racial

as the differences between ideas and practices that underwrite discrimination based on race versus that based on gender. Most importantly, for the purposes of this dissertation, both approaches inadvertently shore up the impression that race factors into Sasha and Julia's lives only when characters of color or colonial settings enter the picture.

The gendered forms of class discrimination borne by *Midnight* and *Mackenzie's* English protagonists offer a crucial, underexplored basis on which to theorize the operations of race and empire. The sexist classism depicted in these texts employs rhetorical tropes and common-sense reasoning that harbor tacit conclusions by bourgeois, English men about the racial status of poor English women, as the traits invoked to characterize the latter group—idleness, dependency, lack of self-discipline, hyper-emotionality—mirror those invoked to characterize nonwhite, colonized populations abroad. Scholars in colonial discourse studies have thoroughly demonstrated that within the contexts of imperial rule, what it meant to be “European” and “white” was never separable from bourgeois cultural standards (Stoler). Failure to adhere to the latter often entailed a precarious relationship to the former, and while this was particularly true for whites living in the colonies, it pertained to those living in the metropole as well. “[T]he making of European bourgeois identity,” Ann Laura Stoler observes, played out across an “imperial landscape” (5).<sup>7</sup> A thorough account of how race factors into *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* must attend to the ways in which construction of an English race fit for

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and gender oppression, it nonetheless reveals the important way in which ... Rhys's writing about the situation of English women never drew solely on the metropole ...” (96-97).

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Stoler's work, in *Race and the Education of Desire*, engages primarily with a Dutch East-Indies colonial archive, but she also draws regularly on material from British and French colonial contexts and frames her insights as being geared toward the study of European colonialism in general, as suggested by her use of a phrase like “European bourgeois identity.” Historically, her claims and archival materials pertain to a long period from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, though there is a strong focus on the 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup>.

imperial rule entailed the marginalization of poor Englishwomen. As one of Rhys' sharpest critics observes, "the claims of Englishness" were "dependent upon the dehumanization of *both* the metropolitan Self and its peripheral Others" (V. Gregg 179, emphasis added).<sup>8</sup>

Colonial discourses were rife with concerns about the alleged moral laxity and degenerate habits of the colonized. "The trope of the 'lazy black' whose refusal to work poses a threat to civilization" was a fixture in British imperial writings about the Caribbean (V. Gregg 11). While stereotypes about the native population provided the foundations for colonial race relations, these stereotypes also had ramifications for poor Europeans, mixed-bloods, and European Creoles born in the colonies (categories which could but did not always overlap). By virtue of their economic status, interracial descent, or place of birth and upbringing, these groups were closely associated with the culture, values, and habits of nonwhite, colonized races and incited "pervasive anxiety about white degeneration in the colonies" (Stoler 102). As Sue Thomas has shown, English commentators in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries often viewed the West Indies as a place where "the general mood is one of 'torpid content'" with "'whites whom we planted as our representatives ... drifting into ruin" (17, 19). These claims about white degeneracy rested upon theories about the effects of exposure to stifling, tropical climes, which

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<sup>8</sup> Of all Rhys' critics, Veronica Marie Gregg comes closest to this chapter's argument about Rhys' fiction in her readings of Rhys' late short stories. Across these stories, Gregg notes, "Metropolitan social arrangements are informed by imperialist aggression," which leads to the othering of the English poor and wayward Englishwomen (164). Gregg's tends to fall back, however, on vague concepts and phrases that mystify rather than elucidate systems of oppression—broad references, for instance, to "the metropolitan social and cultural system of values" or "mechanisms of power and the 'false consciousness' of the dominant discourses" (165, 177). Those who have not "conformed to the social system," Gregg writes, are ostracized because they are "not ideologically 'white'" (165, 166). Although this is true, Gregg does not really specify the criteria by which an individual's whiteness is deemed suspect. The values and logics on which this "social system" rests, along with how they manifest in everyday reasoning and ordinary conversation, are left vague.



allegedly induced the “reversion of all racial groups to the stereotypical ‘nature’ of black people: ‘chattering, idle, listless’” (Thomas 12). The reputed indolence of the colonized and of decadent white colonists provided points of contrast for metropolitan whites whose claims to authentic Englishness were verified by their self-discipline and work ethic. This feature of discourse in and about the British Caribbean reflects a more general discursive pattern across European colonial holdings: poor Europeans, mixed-bloods, and even well-to-do European Creoles composed what Stoler describes as “an ambiguous, hybrid population,” one that “confused the equation of whiteness and middle-class sensibilities” (106). Bereft of bourgeois values or domestic arrangements, their class liminality was linked to a racial liminality:

They allegedly lacked the “inclination” to skilled work, the “suitability” for it, the self-discipline, sexual morals, and economic independence that would count them among a citizenry fit to rule. But whether it was their “class location” or racial attributes that were maligned is difficult to tell, for here was a scrambled category that made distinctions between racial and class discriminations blurred and problematic. (Stoler 130)

Colonial anxieties about white racial degeneration thus manifested in the “insistent policing of those Europeans who fell from middle-class grace” (Stoler 102).

Europeans who fell from middle-class grace, however, were policed in the metropole as well, and *there, too*, a lack of bourgeois values and decorum could imply a racially liminal status. In several European countries, including Britain, 19<sup>th</sup>-century liberal reform movements targeted the demoralized living conditions of the poor, and these metropolitan civilizing missions drew upon colonial practices and debates. When playing out in the colonies, Stoler notes, such debates “took on an *explicitly* racialized form,” but this is not to say that metropolitan discourses of class were unrelated to race

(119, emphasis added). Indeed, metropolitan class discourses frequently inclined toward racial language. English reformers lent authority to their projects by “comparing the moral degradation of the British urban poor with ‘many savage tribes’” (Stoler 125). The management of the English poor at home was part of a discourse cementing the link, throughout the empire, between bourgeois class distinction and true belonging to the imperial race. Thus, the racial status of the metropolitan poor was constantly muddled by their discursive enmeshment in a web of associations with degenerate white colonials and with colonized groups both far and near. Features such as “‘chronic self-indulgence, indolence and laxity of purpose’ were invoked to distinguish the urban and rural laboring classes throughout Europe, both mixed-bloods and subaltern whites throughout the colonies” (Stoler 127). Insofar as metropolitan class discourses solidified the link between Englishness and bourgeois status, they drew upon and fed into the project of colonialism, where the same link was key to the power structures of colonial rule.

Women, moreover, were always more intensely subject to the dynamic by which a lack of bourgeois values and domestic arrangements could translate to a decline in racial status. The racial standing of English women, both in the metropole and in the colonies, was always more tenuous than that of English men. As Radhika Mohanram explains, Englishwomen’s role as “the reproducer[s] of the ethnic/racial group” placed their sexuality at the core of Britishness and rendered them the most likely source of its dilution given their alleged, feminine lack of self-control—especially if they were poor (34). European men could often live with or marry non-European women in the colonies “without necessarily losing rank, but this was never true for a European woman who might make a similar choice to live [with] or marry a non-European” man (Stoler 115). In

the early-twentieth century, as Thomas has observed, anxieties about the health of the English race arose in the metropole through moral panics about “amateur” prostitutes, impoverished women like Rhys’ protagonists who negotiated implicit contracts with men trading sex for cash, clothing, nights out, and more. Amateur women were blamed for “the incidence of venereal disease during the First World War” and for the “falling birthrate and changing attitudes toward motherhood in the 1920s” (Thomas 67, 69). As threats to the bourgeois family and to the male “soldier-citizen,” they “tapped eugenic fears” and “were represented as threatening a racial degeneration” (Thomas 68). Such anxieties over the fitness of the nation’s military implicitly mark the sexual control of poor English women as an imperial concern.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, “If there is any discourse that joins the triumph of rational bourgeois man in colony and metropole,” Stoler maintains, “it was that which collapsed non-Europeans and women into an undifferentiated field, one in which passion and not reason reigned” (Stoler 128-129).

The gendered forms of class discrimination that Rhys’ protagonists endure at the hands of the English bourgeoisie exemplify the dynamics outlined by these critics of colonial discourse. The health and fitness to rule of the imperial-metropolitan race are shored up by the paternalistic efforts of its bourgeois members to discipline the degenerate poor and to alienate those poor individuals deemed unrepentant in their degeneracy and thus beyond saving. The very language that Rhys’ bourgeois characters use to stigmatize Sasha and Julia signals that the misogynistic classicism depicted in these metropolitan stories is tied to the racial discourses of British empire: Julia, in

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<sup>9</sup> Mohanram makes this imperial connection more explicit by noting that the institutions and policing practices used to control the activity of amateur women in England had clear precedents in earlier use of these techniques for regulating prostitution by Indian women in the colonies (80-82).

Mackenzie's eyes, as lacking self-control, as irresponsible, indolent, immoral (a liar), and impulsive (hyperemotional). These are the terms used to denigrate the colonized and the déclassé European colonists associated with them. This does not mean that Sasha and Julia are targets of racism; they are targets of a gendered classism that dovetails with the racial project of imperialism. The discourses are distinct, but they share the feature of ascribing qualities like rationality, industriousness, self-discipline, and sexual restraint to an idealized vision of white, middle-class Englishmen circulated throughout an imperial landscape to justify the subjection of *both* nonwhite races and degenerate whites abroad *and* women and the poor at home.

Rhys in fact signals, in the novels themselves, that the gendered classism Sasha and Julia face carries racial connotations, but this point has been overlooked because such signals of racial content do not take the form of the unambiguous blackness—of a clear “Africanist presence” (in Toni Morrison’s words)—that critics have typically relied upon to register the operations of race in a white character’s social and psychic life. In *Mackenzie*, Julia’s mother is both a Brazilian Creole and a comatose stroke victim. She is described as “[d]ark-skinned” and “inarticulate” (even before her stroke), but we are not given definite information about her lineage (97, 105). She could be non-European, mixed-race, or a woman of European descent born and raised in South America. Whatever she is, her racial status is liminal. Julia, on the other hand, was born and raised in England, and *if* she has inherited any non-English blood from her mother, it does not show: while she endures a great deal of class- and gender-based discrimination, at no point in the novel does any character stigmatize Julia on the basis of race. As regards her blood ancestry and place of birth and upbringing, Julia’s Englishness is not suspect. As

regards her *class* status, however, it is. Having fallen from middle-class grace and showing no concerted efforts toward recuperating it, Julia is marginalized by her more bourgeois family members in a way that throws her Englishness into question. Through tropes of dependency, idleness, and hyper-emotionality, Rhys associates Julia's class liminality with her mother's racial liminality.

"Natural, accepting transplantation as a plant might have done. But sometimes you could tell that she was sickening for the sight of the sun"—Rhys has Julia think about her mother in terms that draw upon imperial stereotypes about the torpid tropics and Creole languishment, a pattern which reminds us that Julia is neither herself a Creole nor immune, as a lifetime resident of the metropole, to imperialist images and narratives used to represent them (105). But whereas the members of the metropolitan bourgeoisie might disparage such languorousness as a marker of degeneracy, *déclassé* Julia embraces it as a refuge from the chilling culture of industrious self-discipline that alienates her in England. She weaves "innumerable romances about her mother's childhood in South America" and always recalls the one thing her mother said about England: "'I can't rest in this country. This is such a cold, grey country'" (123). The word "rest" serves as a linguistic link between mother and daughter, for Julia uses the same term a few pages earlier as a conspicuous code word when dropping in on a past lover named Mr. James to ask for cash.

She said, rather sullenly: "I got fed up. I felt I needed a rest. I thought perhaps you'd help me to have a rest."

At last she has come to the point – relief of Mr James! And yet he felt harder, now that he was sure she had come to ask for money. Everybody tried to get money out of him. By God, he was sick of it. (*Mackenzie* 113)

Rhys' carefully repeated diction creates a link between Julia's begrudged dependency on middle-class English men and the utterly dependent figure of her mother. The two types of dependency are of course not equivalent (for one cannot help her condition due to sickness and old age). But the image of Julia's mother—inert, aside from fits of crying “loudly and disconsolately, like a child”—becomes a kind of infantilized and ableist embodiment of the concept of dependency itself, such that the family's comments about her palpably double as side comments about Julia: ““You know,”” her sister Norah tells her about their mother, ““she's a dead weight”” (99).

Frequent run-ins with her sister and her Uncle Griffiths on account of her mother's bad health repeatedly attest to a schism between Julia and the rest of her family, one that is class-based yet racially tinged by the role that the figure of her Creole mother plays in mediating it. Julia's austere sister reads a bleak symbolism into their mother's condition: ““The fact is,” said Norah, ‘that there's something wrong with our family. We're soft, or lazy, or something,’” a claim that Julia promptly denies (102). Indeed, Norah's work ethic—that quality so central to imperialist racial distinctions—sets her at odds with her prodigal sister. Materially, Norah is about as poor as Julia, but she attenuates her class liminality by *aspiring* to bourgeois values. This manifests most clearly in Norah's role as her comatose mother's diligent, self-sacrificing caretaker. Despite her domestic care work being agonizingly underappreciated, Norah adheres to an ascetic Protestant work ethic as the price of enjoying what Julia lacks: belonging within the English nation's social fold: “It was a sort of drug,” she reflects, “that unvarying admiration – the feeling that one was doing what one ought to do [...]. It made you feel protected and safe” (104). Norah's work ethic allows her to curry the favor of Uncle

Griffiths, the family's stingy middle-class patriarch, who is openly contemptuous of his other niece. When Julia asks Uncle Griffiths for money, he paternalistically interrogates her about her absent husband and failed marriage before finally rendering his condescending verdict: "He said that he had not got any money and that if he had he would not give it to Julia [...] but to her sister Norah, and that he would like to help Norah, because she was a fine girl, and she deserved it" (83). This familial class conflict comes to a boil when Julia's mother passes away. Bending to kiss her mother's dead body, Julia notes that her relatives "were all looking at her, expecting perhaps some violent and hysterical outburst," and she eventually give them just that (123). Unable to shake the feeling that her mother's funeral service is all a bunch of "talking and posturing," Julia lashes out at her family for what she is convinced their bourgeois decorum is "there to prevent her from seeing": relief at being free of a dead weight despite that dead weight being kin—relief that Julia cannot help but take personally (130). Julia's alienation from her more "respectable" members family is not marked by any overtly racial language, yet throughout these scenes, Rhys signals the capacity of class-based dynamics to carry racial implications by representing Julia's dissociation from her bourgeois family through a proportionally *increased* association with her racially ambiguous mother. While the latter figure makes the racial connotations of Julia's class-based estrangement palpable, Julia's non-Creole racial liminality is rooted in her non-bourgeois class habits: it is *their* racial significance that the associations with her mother's Creole-ness bring into relief.

In *Midnight*, too, Rhys cues readers into the links between class and racial liminality, and again, this occurs in ways likely to be missed by those relying on an Afro-

Caribbean presence as the litmus test for the racial-ness of a situation or experience in a white character's life. The idea of "Englishness" plays a key role in how Rhys registers the racial content of the sexist classism her protagonist endures. In Paris, Sasha's gigolo friend René tells her about his lucrative plans of moving to England where wealthy women are "just gasping for it," what with (so he has heard) "fifty per cent of the men [being] homosexual and most of the others not liking it so much" (*Midnight* 157). Sasha warns René that it will not be so easy for him, but he remains unfazed:

"You talk like that because you're a woman, and everybody knows England isn't a woman's country. [...] But for me it will be different."

That's his idea. But he'll find out that he will be up against racial, not sexual, characteristics. Love is a stern virtue in England. (Usually a matter of hygiene, my dear. The indecent necessity – and who would spend money or thought or time on the indecent necessity? [...]) (157)

As Sasha hints in her mockingly prim and ladylike voice, both middle-class English men *and* middle-class English women find sex an "indecent necessity" not so much because it is sordid as because it is rash. As the antithesis of a "stern" activity, sex invites passionate attachments that threaten one's ability to drop a lover who becomes too boring or dependent. (The secret to life is never to go too far or too deep.) A gigolo looking to be kept by a well-to-do English woman will fare no better than a mistress looking to be kept by a wealthy English man because the English bourgeoisie in general maintains a frigid impersonality that keeps liaisons between the classes "hygien[ic]." Sasha thus alludes to how Englishness, as a "racial, not sexual, characteristic[]," emerges out of a national culture of classist sex and intimacy policing. A clean and healthy English race depends upon the bourgeoisie's stern management of their interactions with the poor, which depends, in turn, upon sternly managing their feelings toward them.



Sasha's own history with men, like Julia's, has left her no stranger to unloving sternness. René ostensibly befriends Sasha because he senses a kindred, down-and-out spirit with whom to commiserate, but Sasha has her guard up from the moment he starts opening up to her: "Shall I tell him to go to hell? But after all, I think, this is where I might be able to get some of my own back. You talk to them, you pretend to sympathize; then, just at the moment when they are not expecting it, you say: 'Go to hell'" (72). This guardedness also manifests through her vindictive sense of humor: "He is looking straight ahead, gathering himself up for some effort. He is going to say his piece. I have done this so many times myself that it is amusing to watch somebody else doing it" (73). These rhetorical gestures are clearly the by-products of past experiences of sexist class subordination, yet Sasha signals in her narration that they are not *just* class- and gender-related but *race*-related as well. "'But why do you want to talk to me?'" she asks René:

He says: "Because I think you won't betray me."

I had meant to get this man to talk to me and tell me all about it, and then be so *devastatingly English* that perhaps I should manage to hurt him a little in return for all the many times I've been hurt. [...] Now it won't be so easy. (73, emphasis added)

Talking to someone, pretending to sympathize, then telling them to go to hell may be a tactic for establishing class identity and difference, but it is not only that. As Rhys implies through Sasha's word choice—"devastatingly English," not "devastatingly bourgeois"—the practice of keeping the poor (sternly) at arm's length also speaks to the racial status of its practitioners by aligning them with the class whose values and interests shape the nation's dominant culture. In using the adjective "English" to describe Sasha's brutally unsympathetic bearing toward René, Rhys hints at the underlying potential of class mannerisms to signify racial identity.

That potential is *clarified* when a nonwhite, colonial migrant body enters the picture. One of Sasha's few friends in Paris, a painter named Serge, tells her a story about a woman he once met while living in a London boarding house. She was alienated by her English lover and spent her time drinking and crying herself to death. "Exactly like me," Sasha says; "Not like you at all," Serge replies, "She wasn't a white woman. She was half-Negro – a mulatto" (95).

'She came from Martinique, she said, and she had met this monsieur in Paris, the monsieur she was with on the top floor. Everybody in the house knew she wasn't married to him, but it was even worse that she wasn't white. She said that every time they looked at her she could see how they hated her, and the people in the streets looked at her in the same way. At first she didn't mind – she thought it comical. But now she had got so that she would do anything not to see people. [...] I said: "But this monsieur you are with, what about him?" "Oh, he is very Angliche, he says I imagine everything." (96)

The parallels to Sasha's own history are apparent: the unwed dependency on an aloof, English lover, the determination to weather adversity by striving to find it funny. But their situations are of course hardly identical, for the class and gender marginalization suffered by the woman in the anecdote is made "even worse" by the racism she encounters as a nonwhite migrant from the colonies. Perhaps even more important than the story itself, however, is Sasha's icy response to it, which demonstrates how the class attribute of a stolid, bourgeois unemotionality can serve to establish racial difference. "I've never forgotten this," Serge says, concluding his story about the woman, "Seriously, all the time I was in London, I felt as if I were being suffocated, as if a large *derrière* was sitting on me" (98). But Sasha does not share his horror: "Well, some people feel that way and other people, of course, don't. It all depends" (98). This "very Angliche" reply strikes a clear antithesis between Sasha and the Martiniquan woman,

who (as Serge notes at the beginning of his story) ““had been crying so much that it was impossible to tell whether she was pretty or ugly”” (95). Sasha’s class decline brings with it a concomitant racial liminality captured by her subjection as an Englishwoman to “devastatingly English” forms of oppression. But in her unemotional reply to Serge’s anecdote, she props up her tenuous Englishness through contrast with the spectacle of a hyperemotional colonized body, a contrast that occurs not through racial language but through classed comportment, through a phlegmatic bourgeois temperament.

The potential for bourgeois class distinctions to serve as criteria of racial inclusion and exclusion becomes *explicitly* manifest when non-English, nonwhite bodies enter the picture, but this does not indicate that the maintenance of class distinctions has *nothing* to do with race when those bodies are absent. This is precisely the impression that Rhys seeks to avoid by suffusing her text with moments like Sasha’s comment about being “devastatingly English” to René or her claim that, in England, he will be up against “racial, not sexual, characteristics.” By routinely naming the Englishness at stake in the display or lack of traits like self-dependence, a Protestant work ethic, sexual modesty, and stolid rationality, Rhys emphasizes how classist discourses ubiquitously provide substance to racial categories, often through language that is not racial at all (let alone overtly racist) and in interactions where nonwhite people are neither physically nor conversationally present. The mediating figure of Julia’s Creole mother helps to crystallize the racial connotations that her sister and uncle’s class-based judgments and practices have *already* put in the air. Likewise, Sasha’s reaction to the black woman in Serge’s story does not constitute an instance in which her self-presentational choices suddenly become race-related for a moment. Rather, it reveals how race-related her

choices of self-presentation *have always been*, reminding us that the strategies she uses *throughout* the novel to deal with the psychic and bodily strains of women's impoverishment work as begrudging attempts to buy into a bourgeois Englishness from which she has mostly been cast out. Her grim adherence to standards of dispassionate bourgeois decorum enables her to purchase a modicum of English racial status, which she wields, however meagerly, to shore up a sense of superiority over comparably classed others. This dynamic attests not just to her experiences with gendered class discrimination but to her ability to affect an albeit compromised Englishness that offsets them, an Englishness whose accessibility depends on her whiteness. The appearance of a colonized subject whose blackness prevents her from recourse to similar measures makes this dynamic strikingly visible for a moment, but the dynamic itself is a perpetual feature of Sasha's survival—one that Rhys registers but hardly condemns.

Indeed, while *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* show Rhys to be a shrewd critic of the racial and imperial implications of gendered classism, her insights are hardly free of contradictions. Rhys was aware that her English protagonist's suffering would be, in Serge's words, "even worse" if she were not white, but beyond the simple acknowledgement of this fact, Rhys' critique of class-based racial dynamics is limited. The understanding she had of Afro-Caribbeans' oppression did not stop her from contributing to it through fetishistic or patronizing representations of black people. Toward the end of *Midnight*, Sasha's frigid disposition becomes increasingly frustrating for René, and he attempts to guilt her out of her defenses by remarking on the ghastliness of her capacity for cold, rational aloofness. She is, he alleges,

“a woman who likes nothing and nobody except herself and her own damned brain or what she thinks is her brain.”

So pleased with herself, like a little black boy in a top-hat. ...

“In fact, a monster.”

“Yes, a monster.” (162)

As if by instinct, Sasha reads a racial insinuation into René’s comment about her classed gender presentation, one that associates blackness with a pitiful, immature, and naive paucity of the self- restraint which is, for her, a point of not just necessity but pride. This simile comes and goes in a flash, the lack of pressure or reflection placed upon its racial trope signaling the *uncritical*-ness with which Rhys deploys it. *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* illuminate the racial stakes of gendered class discrimination, revealing the diffuseness and subtlety with which the white supremacy of British colonialism inflects social relations in the imperial metropole even between whites. Yet Rhys was unable (or unwilling) to register the colonialist, white-supremacist implications behind her own representations. Sara Eeva notes that in *Voyage in the Dark* and the *Wide Sargasso Sea*,

Rhys’ protagonists wish to non-problematize – or refuse to admit – the whiteness of white Creoles, but certainly they still endeavor to problematize the “real whiteness” that is tightly interwoven with Englishness. In the text the white Creole women themselves never name their whiteness. ... They articulate their differences from “real white people,” but not their similarities. (251)

This phenomenon is not exclusive, however, to the Caribbeanist portion of Rhys’ oeuvre. Sasha and Julia are not Creoles, but their class liminality in the metropole begets its own kind of racial liminality and inclines them, too, “to problematize the ‘real whiteness’ that is tightly interwoven with Englishness.” In the process, they “never name their whiteness” either. Rhys thus illustrates how imperialist white supremacy informs the gendered class discrimination that takes place between English metropolitan whites, but

the language, imagery, and perspectives she uses to do this are also structured by the subtle forms of white supremacy she critiques.

## II

With their focus on everyday life and close attention to language, novels are especially effective at modeling how diffuse, structural forces can manifest at the level of individual, lived experience through particular vocabularies, rhetorical tropes, and ingrained forms of common sense. We have seen how Rhys' metropolitan fiction depicts the local, mundane instantiations of a systemic and gendered class discrimination linked to the project of British imperialism—to the maintenance of a consummately bourgeois, English race fit for imperial rule. But this is only half the story. In *Midnight* and *Mackenzie*, Rhys does not simply portray racially charged forms of gendered class discrimination; she also enacts modes of resistance to this discrimination through the very tone and style of her writing. In narrating the indignities suffered by her protagonists, Rhys uses two rhetorical devices to create an unnerving and humbling reading experience for implied, bourgeois readers: the second-person voice and a sardonic sense of humor.

Halfway through *Midnight*, for example, Sasha abruptly breaks the flow of her narrative to make the following scornful announcement:

this is my attitude to life. Please, please monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed, but look how hard I try. Three hours to choose a hat; every morning an hour and a half trying to make myself look like everybody else. [...] And mind you, I know that with all this I don't succeed. [...] But think how hard I try and how seldom I dare. Think – and have a bit of pity. That is, if you ever think, you apes, which I doubt. (106)

Sasha's "you" refers, in theory, to the bourgeois men and women that co-exist with her in the world of the novel, yet she does not actually address her comment to anyone in that world. It is hard to escape the feeling that as a narrator highly conscious of her position as a storyteller, she is visualizing her implied readers, assuming them, too, to be bourgeois, and catching them in an oblique pronominal crossfire. Taken at face-value, her passive-aggressive remarks indicate that what angers her about her implied readers is their lack of sympathy. Her tone, however, suggests a more nuanced complaint. If what Sasha wants is "pity," insulting her readers' intelligence and calling them names is a strange way of asking of it. In fact, the snarling epithet "apes" suggests that pity might be precisely what she wants to avoid. The gushingly suppliant voice that opens the passage confirms this: "Please, please [...] I am trying so hard [...] look how hard I try." These effusively prostrate lines represent less a genuine act of begging for sympathy than a sardonic, disaffected parody of one. Her subsequent, cheeky indication that she is one step ahead of her audience ("mind you, I know that with all this I don't succeed") only adds to the effect of making her less pitiful, not more, by warding off imputations of naiveté and turning them back on her readers. Sasha's stance toward her readers' pity, in other words, is not just paradoxical but vindictively so: she wants them to offer it but only so that she can scornfully refuse it, gaining initiative over those seemingly positioned to judge her in the process.

Both *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* are rife with such uses of sardonic humor and the second-person voice, along with the passive-aggressive tone they create. Rhys anticipates, on behalf of implied, bourgeois readers, an inclination not unlike that of her bourgeois characters: that of rendering paternalistic judgments about how much

sympathy and assistance her impoverished protagonists deserve, whether those judgments lead to patronizing pity or scornful indifference. The tonal and stylistic features of Rhys' writing place this inclination under constant scrutiny and pressure, predicting, mocking, and evading it. Specifically, there are two ways in which Rhys' tone and style challenge the classism depicted in her texts. First, her rhetorical devices work to corner bourgeois readers into a more self-conscious, less presumptuous mindset for thinking about the poor. As Sasha's "attitude to life" announcement demonstrates, Rhys' use of sardonic humor dispels any sense of intimacy or transparency between her protagonist and her readers. In obliquely addressing those "apes," her implied bourgeois readership, Sasha does not "open up" to them so much as shut them out: enough is said to make her distrust and resentment clear, but beyond that, her thoughts and feelings remain spitefully opaque. This cagey, sardonic humor, then, refuses readers access to intimate details about the thoughts and lives of poor individuals that might facilitate paternalistic judgments about their deservingness of sympathy and support. When Rhys *pairs* such sardonic humor with the second-person voice, she not only destabilizes the grounds on which readers might feel complacent and informed enough to judge her protagonists but, further, prods them to interpret Sasha and Julia's narratives as incitements to *self*-scrutiny—as texts in which "you," the reader, are being watched and prompted to take stock of the problematic assumptions and forms of common-sense reasoning that might mar your own thinking about the causes of women's impoverishment and what it supposedly indicates about their character. The second way in which Rhys' form and style interrupt the sexist classism depicted in her texts is that she uses Sasha and Julia's seething, passive-aggressive tone to challenge one of the key tenets of the patriarchal



bourgeoisie's common-sense thinking about poor women: their alleged laziness and lack of self-control. Rhys' tense tone bears vivid witness to just how much of her protagonists' everyday lives are made up of a constant, informal yet no less taxing labor of affective self-discipline: the labor of managing pent-up resentment so as not to let these feelings get the better of them and result in behavior that might call attention to themselves for the wrong reasons. Sasha's blunt "you apes" comment is no exception. Her flash of volatility testifies to how much anger she has long since been bottling up, but her decision to lash out only at *imagined* readers and not to the actual bourgeoisie around her shows that even when venting her frustration, she carefully does so only in her head.

In making these two claims about the politics of Rhys' form, I follow the lead of Sianne Ngai, who has observed that tone bears "particular resonance for ideological analysis" because ideology "shares tone's virtual, diffused, but also immanent character" (49, 47). Throughout *Midnight* and *Mackenzie*, Rhys represents the paternalistic ideology of the patriarchal English bourgeoisie—their common-sense ideas about poor women—in terms of its subtle, "diffused" manifestations in everyday life. It is fitting, then, that she would lodge her counter-discourse to this ideology in the likewise diffused and subtle phenomenon that is her texts' tonal atmosphere. Her passive-aggressive tone and the sardonic humor and second-person voice on which it rests express the silenced feelings and perspectives of subjects who a) face constant condescension from bourgeois observers who presume to know their circumstances and b) devote a vast amount of gallingly unrecognized self-discipline to the affective labor of stomaching that condescension.

After her conversation with the man whose lover is asking him for money, Sasha leaves the bar with him and mentions that she is hungry. This is a risky move given their conversation, which suggests that this man will front the cost of a drink or two in pursuit of sexual favors but draws the line once a woman starts looking to be clothed or fed. Sure enough, as soon as Sasha mentions her hunger, he gets into a taxi without a word and abandons her in the street.

And did I mind? Not at all, not at all. If you think I minded, then you've never lived like that, plunged in a dream, when all the faces are masks and only the trees are alive and you can almost see the strings that are pulling the puppets. Close-up of human nature – isn't it worth something?

I expect that man thought Fate was conspiring against him – what with his girl's shoes and me wanting food. But there you are, if you're determined to get people on the cheap, you shouldn't be so surprised when they pitch you their own little story of misery sometimes. (*Midnight 90*)

We have already noted how Sasha's closing if-then statement points out the contradictions in this man's common sense (*if* this girl is lying, her material needs are probably more genuine, not less). Sasha's narrative commentary in response to this indignity, however, is also an instructive case of Rhys' tonal and stylistic tactics. The direct address to readers in Sasha's first paragraph ("If you think I minded") sets up a troubling dynamic. She signals that she is thinking about her readers and their reactions as she tells the story, but lest this be misunderstood as some kind of chummy intimacy, she also makes clear that she is only acknowledging them in order to push them away. "And did I mind? Not at all"—a verbal shrug of the hand off her shoulder. This sense of her neither needing nor wanting the reader's pity is reinforced by the deadpan, sardonic humor with which she narrates her own humiliation: her macabre, marionette-like imagery and the wry joke she makes about this poor man being hassled by "Fate." Sasha

wears this mordant sense of humor like an eerie, smiling mask. Its function is simultaneously to provoke pity from readers by suggesting that these indignities are a frequent part of her life and then to scorn that pity by signaling that such indignities are so frequent that she has grown inured to them. As she puts it elsewhere in another sardonic aside: “when I think of my life it seems to me so comical that I have to laugh. It has taken me a long time to see how comical it has been, but I see it now, I do” (76).

The “you” in Sasha’s second paragraph is even more unnerving: “[Y]ou shouldn’t be so surprised when they pitch you their own little story of misery.” This remark could be read as a chiding apostrophe, a belated address to the man in the story, or just as Sasha brooding to herself. But it could also be read as a roundabout stab at her readers. By voicing this rebuke after having just interpellated readers a few lines before, Sasha constructs her narration so that they can feel obliquely targeted by this upbraiding. The tacit implication is that she suspects them of needing to be told this: that without her commentary, they would miss the hypocrisy in this “[c]lose-up of human nature” and be unequipped to perceive the ways in which their own thoughts and actions might perpetuate it. That suspicion itself indicates that whatever range of readers she might have, the ones Sasha has in mind are bourgeois, and she has them in mind because she does not trust them. They may be more liberal and less callous than the man in the story, but they are still removed enough from her own circumstances—“you’ve never lived like that”—to need help understanding why his moralizations are absurd and why she is so un-reactively good-humored about his rudeness. The fact that this pointed address is ambiguous, that Sasha *might* be referring to the reader but does not explicitly say so, adds a layer of understatement that only makes her critique more acerbic. It is as if she cannot

be bothered to say this to readers directly because she has no faith that they will heed her complaints or because she is convinced they will do so only in a patronizing way.

I propose the phrase “glancing 2<sup>nd</sup> person” to name this awkward, even torturous formal device in which one cannot be sure whether the deictic “you” marks the protagonist addressing herself or some other fictional character versus the protagonist singling out readers whom she is spitefully inviting to feel what it is like to walk in her shoes. These uses of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person, in which the word “you” glances or ricochets off a fictional referent to catch readers in a passive-aggressive crossfire, enable Rhys to raise pointed ethical questions about why and for whom the story is being told. Is Sasha imagining an audience that might partake of her experience so that they can better understand and pity her? Or is she using them instead—with no regard for their approval and understanding—as a mere rhetorical prop for venting her frustration and gaining a better grasp on her own situation by narrating it as if to someone else? Rhys’ tonal cues point toward the latter scenario, but this does not amount to a suggestion that readers should feel *un*-implicated by the story, for that freedom is precisely what the glancing 2<sup>nd</sup> person is designed to foreclose. Rhys is not concerned about whether or not readers *approve* of her protagonist; she is concerned about readers feeling entitled to judge her protagonist *at all*, whether by condemning or pitying them. Her prose is formulated to frustrate that presumptuousness: “You shouldn’t be so surprised when they pitch you their own little story of misery.” By placing the imperative in the negative and *not* speculating about what lies behind such little stories, Rhys refuses readers corrective insights about what the poor are “really” like. Her evasive rhetorical maneuvers do not help readers amend moral distinctions between “deserving” and “undeserving”

individuals but rather invalidates the impulse to make such distinctions altogether, leaving readers hesitant to pass such judgments due to a lack of information that undermines confidence in the legibility of “the poor” as a social category.

In *Mackenzie*, these stylistic effects are especially evident in Rhys’ representation of the relationship between Julia and her most recent acquaintance, Mr. Horsfield. A rather special case amongst Rhys’ bourgeois men, Horsfield falls on the more liberal end of the political spectrum, and though sympathetic toward Julia’s struggles, his main reason for befriending her is boredom. After meeting her during a night of slumming, he sticks around because the act of sympathizing with her allows him to fill a personal void of middle-class anomie. When she takes him back to her lodgings one evening, her landlady accuses her of being a prostitute, and Horsfield defends Julia in a suspiciously vague rush of “overwhelming contempt for the organization of society” (166). Afterward, while walking home, he rides out the progressive euphoria of siding with the underdog by imagining a hypothetical spiel he will give to Julia the next morning: “He would hold her two hands [...] and say: ‘Don’t look at me like that. That was how you looked at me last night. Why should you look at me like that? I’m for you and for people like you, and I’m against the others. Can’t you see that? [...] I hate things as much as you do’” (167). Julia senses the patronizing shallowness of this relationship from the start and maintains a shrewd skepticism toward Horsfield throughout her interactions with him. “He looked the sort,” she reflects, “that never gives itself away and that despises people who do [...]. He would think: ‘Poor devil.’ Yes, he might go so far as to think like that, but the poor devil would remain a poor devil whom you theorized about but never tried to understand” (87-88). When Rhys uses free indirect discourse to blur the lines between Julia’s thoughts and

the voice of *Mackenzie*'s third-person narrator, Julia's use of the word "you" in her thoughts about Horsfield acquires a discomfiting, glancing-2<sup>nd</sup>-person feel for the reader. No less than in *Midnight* (though more circuitously, given the lack of a first-person narrator), Rhys rhetorically crafts the narration in *Mackenzie* to prod readers into a humbling self-awareness. By conveying Julia's "poor devil" comment via the 2<sup>nd</sup> person, Rhys hints at how the very act of reading can replicate the paternalistic, class-based aggression figured by Horsfield within the text: that of consuming Julia's story with a superficially receptive and solicitous mindset that will still produce, at best, a patronizing form of sympathy-in-spirit-only that does nothing but reduce her to an opportunity for others to feel good about themselves by feeling bad for her. The sad fact, Rhys seems to suggest, is that this is hardly the worst-case scenario. For the other, more prevalent sense in which bourgeois interlocutors might be said to "theorize" about the poor without trying to "understand" them would be the one we have already seen from illiberal men like Mackenzie or the man in Sasha's anecdote: that of using common-sense stereotypes about the laziness and dishonesty of poor individuals—and poor women, in particular—to invalidate their need for support.

Indeed, Julia has just had a humiliating experience of this sort at the hands of her Uncle Griffiths right before meeting Horsfield for a drink. When she had asked her uncle for financial assistance earlier that day, he subjected her to a degrading series of questions about her absent husband before unsurprisingly denying her request. "'They force you to ask,'" she complains to Horsfield, "'and then they refuse you. And then they tell you all about why they refuse you. I suppose they get a subtle pleasure out of it, or something'" (90). That embittering encounter is clearly on her mind during her

conversation with Horsfield throughout the evening, as indicated by her remote body language and spiteful choice of words: “she took a box of matches from her bag and amused herself by lighting them one after another and watching them burn down to the end. In the midst of this proceeding, she said: ‘It’s funny how you say one thing when you’re thinking of quite another, isn’t it?’” (93). Though it refers nominally to Horsfield, Julia’s “you” once again bears that unnerving, glancing-2<sup>nd</sup>-person tone by which Rhys signals to an implied audience that some form of commentary is being made about their position and proclivities as readers. Not least after her run-in with Uncle Griffiths, Julia knows that she has neither moral obligation nor rational incentive to open up to bourgeois people and provide them with earnest personal details they will only use to tell her why they refuse her when they do. (Horsfield, to be sure, does desert her by the end of the novel. Once he realizes his sympathy would entail helping Julia to “a bed to sleep in, food, clothes,” and other material necessities, he cuts her loose at the thought of such hassles [168]). Accustomed, like Sasha, to men who always assume that they have her figured and who always, eventually, let her down, Julia defends her self-esteem by adopting a barbed tone and rhetorical style that create a shroud of vindictive illegibility, sardonic humor by mask-like dissimulation and the 2<sup>nd</sup>-person by indirection. By weaving such displays of tonal and rhetorical evasiveness amongst scenes of bourgeois condescension that provide them with context, Rhys urges readers (in Julia’s words) to *understand* her impoverished protagonists’ shiftless, obstinate behavior rather than jump to the impulse of “theorizing” reasons to condemn it. She urges them, that is, to see Sasha and Julia’s recalcitrant caginess and bitter resignation as well-warranted and reasonable forms of conduct rather than something to moralize about.

Hence, when Sasha recalls telling that man she was hungry right before he abandoned her in the street, she has no qualms about bluntly outing herself in her narration as a habitual liar: “‘C’est vrai,’ I say, giggling still more loudly. ‘It’s quite true. I’ve had nothing to eat for three weeks.’ (Exaggerating, as usual)” (90). The frank, blasé tone of her aside blatantly insinuates that such dishonesty should not mar her character in the eyes of her readers because any reasonable person would see it not as a sign of moral corruption but of survival-oriented common sense. The behavior and thinking in need of scrutiny and rehabilitation, Rhys implies, is not that of the poor but that of the bourgeoisie who judge them. Note the rhetoric in the following recollection by Sasha of the one time she went home to family in London in hopes of financial support:

“Why didn’t you drown yourself,” the old devil said, “in the Seine?” In the Seine, I ask you – but that was just what he said. [...] “We consider you as dead. Why didn’t you make a hole in the water?” [...] These phrases run trippingly off the tongues of the extremely respectable. They think in terms of a sentimental ballad. And that’s what terrifies you about them. It isn’t their cruelty, it isn’t even their shrewdness – it’s their extraordinary naiveté. Everything in their whole bloody world is a cliché. (41-42)

In reviling the “naiveté” of the “respectable” English middle class, Sasha appears to talk to “you” on an intimate basis about “them” (“In the Seine, I ask you”). But like Julia lighting matches and remarking how funny it is when you say one thing while thinking of quite another, Sasha’s final lines, from “It isn’t their cruelty” onward, feel less like her talking *to* readers than at or *through* them, not necessarily acknowledging them and perhaps even suspecting them of the same naiveté without quite saying so to their face. Rhys exhorts readers not to think about the poor in terms of sloppy, common-sense “cliché[s],” but she also avoids making this easy by refusing to provide readers with protagonists who subject themselves to the intimate violence of confessing their



innermost thoughts and feelings and who take it upon themselves to defend the choices they make to avoid or blunt sexist classism on a daily basis. In probing the factors contributing to women's impoverishment, Rhys insists on removing clichés about the degenerate character of poor women from the equation and shifts the burden of accountability onto the common-sense thinking of the middle-class. Her fiction not only frustrates a voyeuristic, bourgeois will to know (and judge) but reverses the gaze, working not as case studies in women's impoverishment for readers' consideration but as an unnerving hall of mirrors that traps readers into a process of self-scrutiny verbally cued by a narrator who scorns their pity from behind a smiling mask.

Sardonic uses of the glancing second person, however, are not the only way in which Rhys' tone and style push back against a pervasive classism bound up with race and gender. In Sasha's interior monologues at the opening of *Midnight*, Rhys uses the 2<sup>nd</sup> person voice to achieve a somewhat different effect:

“[C]areful, careful! Don't get excited. You know what happens when you get excited and exalted, don't you? ... Yes. ... And then, you know how you collapse like a pricked balloon, don't you? Having no staying power. ... Yes, exactly. ... So, no excitement. [...] Above all, no crying in public, no crying at all if I can help it.” (15)

The word “you,” in this case, does not mark an oblique jab at implied readers but rather Sasha admonishing herself to stick to a program of emotional self-restraint that facilitates her survival by allowing her to fly under the radar. As a single woman drifting through the demimonde, she is wary of unwanted attention from middle-class observers who might perceive her as a prostitute or a drunk and internalizes a regimen of rules and rituals to avoid hostile scrutiny. “Not too much drinking, avoidance of certain cafés, of certain streets, and everything will go off beautifully. The thing is to have a programme,

not to leave anything chance” (*Midnight* 15). Well-aware of her vulnerability to stereotypes about the feckless emotionality of poor women, Sasha disciplines herself to bottle up resentment, stifle her depression, and avoid opening up to anyone in hopes of sympathy since this only ever leads to disappointment. Rhys often uses her brooding tone along with occasional, *non*-glancing uses of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person to underscore the sustained, deliberate work that goes into this “programme” of affective self-management and cautious movement through public space. This regimen of emotional austerity, it should be noted, is crucial to how Sasha maintains the straight-laced façade she uses to shore up her claims to Englishness, rendered dubious by the material fact of her non-bourgeois domestic and sexual arrangements.

In addition, then, to preempting the moralizing inclinations of implied bourgeois readers, Rhys uses her tone and style to discredit common-sense stereotypes about the poor being lazy and undisciplined. In critiquing the gendered and racially charged classism that comprises her novelistic content, she suggests not only that the degree of cagey, exhausted shiftlessness that her protagonists do exhibit is both rational and understandable but that they are also not, in fact, as shiftless as they might at first glance seem. The task of evading or coping with misogynistic class stigma and its racial implications compels them to a rigorous, informal labor of affective self-management easily overlooked so long as thinking about “hard work” and “self-discipline” are considered solely in terms of contractual wage labor or informal domestic labor and care work done by women at home. As her self-addressed 2<sup>nd</sup>-person reminders about avoiding certain cafes, streets, and states of feeling attests, Sasha has self-discipline. She just does not have it in the narrow, idiomatic sense connoted by the liberal-individualist

image of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. This common-sense notion of self-discipline—so often deployed in a top-down fashion by the middle-class against the poor—presumes a completely unfeeling, hyper-rational subject. It ignores, that is, the extent to which survival on the social and economic margins can be an affective and not just material experience, one in which self-discipline might entail not only (or even primarily) job seeking and financial regimentation but also the task of managing the pain and anger that accompany material deprivation.

Throughout both novels, Rhys blunts potential criticisms of her protagonists' allegedly lazy, itinerant behavior through scenes and images illustrating how factors like class and gender belie the meritocratic myth that patient and humble industriousness always leads to just desserts. Two of Sasha's flashbacks in *Midnight* recall the indignities of her being fired from a retail job due to a mistake by her misogynistic employer and her quitting work as a tour guide because of repeatedly rude treatment at the hands of entitled, bourgeois customers (*Midnight* 17-31). In *Mackenzie*, it is Julia's sister Norah that Rhys uses to critique the idea of ascetic industriousness as a means of dealing with impoverishment. As discussed earlier, Norah makes an impressively austere living caring for her and Julia's comatose mother. Her dutiful domesticity and her loyalty to the nuclear family have allowed Norah, unlike her sister, to curry the favor Uncle Griffiths and other members of the English bourgeoisie, but as her embittered interior monologue makes clear, this has hardly brought her happiness or relief.

Everybody always said to her: "You're wonderful, Norah, you're wonderful. I don't know how you do it." It was a sort of drug, that universal, that unvarying admiration – the feeling that one was doing what one ought to do, the approval of God and man. It made you feel protected and safe.

Besides, she wasn't a squeamish sort. She could bear the disgusting sights and sounds and smells. And so she had slaved. And she had gradually given up going out because she was too tired to enjoy herself. Besides, there wasn't any money.

[...]

Everybody had said: "You're wonderful, Norah." But they did not help. They just stood around watching her youth die, and her beauty die [...]. They sat there and said: "You're wonderful, Norah." Beasts. ... Devils. ... (*Mackenzie* 104)

In a strategy Rhys implies is about as pitiful as it is fruitless, Norah tries to live off the crumbs of trifling public approbation for her Protestant work ethic. Part of what Rhys highlights, via the blandishing, tedious colloquialisms of the bourgeoisie ("You're wonderful ..."), is the systematic under-appreciation and under-compensation of women's and specifically poor women's labor in the private sphere. But in this image of Norah, or rather in the tone of her brooding, angry voice, Rhys also encodes a critique of how the poor are unfairly expected to handle impoverishment by renouncing forms of leisurely self-indulgence and the much-needed physical and psychic relief they bring. Sasha and Julia refuse to do this. By risking the more lonely, precarious option of being kept by various moneyed men, they seek not just to get by but to get by in a way that declines to forego the little pleasures taken for granted by the middle class, not because they are "impulsive" or "undisciplined" but because they know that occasional, petty consumerism, for example, is extremely valuable as a stopgap measure for dealing with anger and depression. When Sasha's marriage had fallen apart, for instance, she begged money from her family in England and upon receiving a begrudgingly small sum, neither saved it nor used it to look for work: "Tomorrow I'll go to the Galeries Lafayette, choose a dress, go along to the Printemps, buy gloves, buy scent, buy lipstick, [...] buy anything cheap. Just the sensation of spending, that's the point (*Midnight* 145). With the pleasure

of shopping subordinated to its analgesic function, such consumerism functions not as a lapse of self-discipline but an example of it. It is an indispensable part of how Sasha sticks to her program of flying under the radar by taming her emotions. This allegedly irresponsible behavior becomes much more understandable when placed alongside the joyless purgatory of Norah's endlessly self-abnegating industriousness.

Ultimately, the seemingly contrasting examples of Sasha and Norah's outward conduct and inward feelings demonstrate the same point: the paternalistic, bourgeois ideology of hard work and meritocracy has the pernicious, underacknowledged effect of superimposing an uneven distribution of pleasure upon an uneven distribution of wealth. The poor are deprived of not just material but also emotional well-being. Rhys represents this diffuse yet palpable social problem through the diffuse yet palpable aesthetic feature of literary tone, with non-glancing forms of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person being especially useful for this purpose. Whether in Sasha's "careful! [...] You know what happens when you get excited" or in Norah's thought that the bourgeoisie's approval, although begrudged, "ma[kes] you feel protected and safe," Rhys uses the 2<sup>nd</sup>-person voice to capture the conscious efforts of these impoverished women to limit or ration their own access to good feelings and remind themselves why such choking self-restraint is important to their own survival. When perceptions of worthiness are attributed only to the poor who do the hardest work, and when, furthermore, the only work deemed worthy of material compensation is limited to wage labor in the public sphere, those on the social and economic margins are doubly saddled with ugly feelings that exacerbate the stress of material privation: resentment at having to deal with condescension and stigma from the middle class and even more resentment at how no one recognizes the energy and

discipline that the informal labor of dealing with that condescension demands. Sasha's narration, in particular, is designed to convey not just the feeling of being patronizingly judged everywhere she goes but also the compounded, second-order feeling of *having to carry* that feeling around with her. Here she is leaving a restaurant in which a posh Englishwoman has just snickered at the sight of her and whispered a snide remark to the owner:

I would give all that's left of my life to be able to put out my tongue and say: "One word to you," as I pass that girl's table. [...]. As it is I can't speak to her, I can't even look at her. I just walk out.

Never mind. ... One day, quite suddenly, when you're not expecting it, I'll take a hammer from the folds of my dark cloak and crack your little skull like an egg-shell. Crack it will go, the egg-shell; out they will stream, the blood, the brains. (52)

Rhys' tense and seething tone makes the reader feel that a large part of what Sasha resents is the underacknowledged burden of having to be so resentfully on-guard all the time. Indeed, much of the interior monologue comprising *Midnight's* text aims to portray how much time the novel's protagonist spends working to curb her anger and frustration by venting it in carefully controlled doses—by imagining homicide or taking oblique shots at readers ("you apes"). Because Sasha's world is permeated by so much angry wariness, the discrete individuals who provoke it fade into the background, and the toxic atmosphere of ambient bad feeling itself becomes the object of representation: Sasha's constant, smoldering rage at being denied the affective privilege of *not* having to spend every day dodging condescension and stigma from socially and economically advantaged onlookers. In capturing both her protagonist's taut and livid mood as well as the little mental rituals she uses to defuse her pent-up anger ("One day, [... I'll] crack your little

skull like an egg-shell”), Rhys’ tone and style bear witness to an easily neglected dimension of life on the sexual and economic margins: the self-disciplinary labor of curating both one’s outward conduct and inner thoughts and feelings to avoid conforming to common-sense, bourgeois preconceptions about lazy, impulsive, and hyper-emotional poor women.

Insofar as we have already seen how the gendered forms of class discrimination depicted in these two novels dovetail with the project of British colonialism—with the maintenance of a consummately bourgeois English race fit for imperial rule—the social and affective dynamics captured by Rhys’s use of sardonic humor and the second-person voice should be understood, I argue, as racially charged dynamics. What we have here, in the mental and practical survival strategies embodied by Rhys’s tone and style, are the coping mechanisms Sasha and Julia use to navigate the pressures of white intra-racial class policing, the strategies they wield to stomach or evade “devastatingly English” forms of sexist class aggression. Where the preceding section’s analysis of novelistic content reveals the indirect operations of race in class distinctions between whites, this section’s analysis of form reveals Rhys’s protagonists’ affective and rhetorical *responses* to such classist intra-racial boundary work. It is important to the understand the latter, no less than the former, as *racialized* gender and class dynamics, ones that should be of interest to scholars of race and whiteness insofar as they not only exemplify patriarchal, bourgeois white supremacy’s more circuitous manifestations but also offer shrewd critiques of its blinkered, hypocritical logics.

### III

In tracking the ways in which gendered forms of class discrimination against poor whites contribute to the maintenance of a metropolitan English race fit for imperial rule, Rhys illustrates in *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* how ideas and practices that seem to have little to do with race can subtly contribute to the formation of racial identities and hierarchies. In addition to this insight offered at the level of representational content, Rhys also uses her tone and style to pinpoint the hypocrisies and oversights that plague the paternalistic, common-sense thinking about the poor depicted throughout her texts. These observations clearly attest to the ability of Rhys' fiction to illuminate the social and cultural dynamics of British colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy in the early-20<sup>th</sup>-century period in and about which she wrote. I want to conclude by emphasizing that the insights offered by Rhys' fiction into the racial implications of class distinctions between whites and the prejudices in bourgeois thinking about the poor are no less pertinent—are in fact increasingly urgent—to dismantling white supremacy in the present.

The vilification of the poor as lazy, undisciplined, and undeserving of support has become a rote feature of political discourse across a number of countries in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in regard to welfare reform. As Jamie Peck has observed, poverty governance over the past few decades has been marked by the rise of welfare programs designed to “maximize work participation while minimizing ‘dependency’” (10). These work-enforcing welfare policies originated in the United States in the 1970s, but the globalization of neoliberalism has since brought them to prominence in a range of national contexts, including the U.K. (J. Peck 4-5, 17). Across Conservative and New



Labour governments since Thatcher, there has been a sustained commitment in Britain to policy reforms that cut state expenditure on the provision of social services. As numerous scholars have shown, this has been achieved through moral panics about “welfare scroungers” in political discourse and the media, which provide the chief justification for tightening restrictions on means-tested benefits and mandating the poor to pursue any work, no matter how unstable or low-paid (J. Peck 261-340; Fraser 305-324; Fisher; Byrne; Seabrook).

As Steve Garner (2016) notes in his recent study of whiteness in Britain, the increased austerity of the neoliberal welfare state is part of a larger historical context that also includes greater flows of immigrants and refugees to the U.K. (7-8, 80). In the wake of these overlapping factors, one of the predominant manifestations of whiteness in Britain has been a racist and xenophobic discourse in which native-born, white Britons see themselves as being unfairly marginalized by an over-politically-correct state that prioritizes the needs of immigrants and asylum seekers of color in the allocation of housing, jobs, and other resources (Garner 50-137).<sup>10</sup> This supposedly unfair, preferential treatment is deemed even more unacceptable by allegations that migrants do not work or pay taxes for the benefits they claim (Garner 82-83; Ford and Heath 10-11). As British journalist Jeremy Seabrook writes, for instance,

During my time in the West Midlands, many people on benefit – often disabled or severely disadvantaged in some way – expressed their resentment at the vilification of people like themselves. But in order to vindicate their own position, it seems, many have to contrast their situation, and the falsehoods

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<sup>10</sup> While working-class and middle-class white interviewees differed in their attitudes toward migrants in some respects, Garner is emphatic that there is no clear class divide in Britain when it comes to white hostility toward immigrants and refugees (52-53). It is not just working-class or poor whites, in other words, who hold racist and xenophobic views, though Garner does note certain differences in tone and in the particular immigration-related topics discussed by middle-class versus working-class white interviewees (57-64).

attributed to it, with that of the *truly* undeserving. ... A common story at the end of 2014 was of a woman “flown from Africa” to have a Caesarean birth on the National Health Service, simply because she had a visa to enter Britain. ... People had heard stories of “asylum seekers” arriving at the council offices and being given priority accommodation over people who had lived here all their lives (126, original emphasis).

It is important to note that condemning the alleged “welfare tourism” of non-white, non-E.U. migrants is part of a neoliberal discourse of “colour-blind racism” in which racial distinctions are routed through a class-coded language of culture and moral values (Garner 8). In the midst of neoliberal rhetoric about industriousness, individualism, and self-reliance, both state and popular discourses have shifted away from an overt “language of race relations,” with “[s]hared values’ replac[ing] ethnic ties” as the foundation for “conceptions of ‘Britishness’” (Williams 155-156, 155, 154). The problem with migrants from non-E.U. countries, in this colorblind logic, is not (allegedly) that they are not white but that they supposedly lack a proper work ethic, that they are prone to violence and crime, that they have too many children when they cannot afford it, and that these are all features of a larger ethnic and/or poverty-based “culture” that they cannot or will not shed in order to integrate into the host nation by adopting the “British” values of hard work and disciplined individualism (Garner 43-46, 120-137, 159).<sup>11</sup>

In regard to the particular relevance of Rhys’s fiction to this neoliberal conjuncture, what needs to be understood is that *intra*-racial class distinctions between

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<sup>11</sup> As Garner notes, “The practice[] of making ‘asylum seeker’ or ‘illegal immigrant’ stand in for all BME [black and minority ethnic] people ... demonstrates that significant numbers of white UK people still base their ideas of who belongs in the UK primarily on traditional physical markers” (9). In other words, “‘cultural’ forms of racism co-exist happily with the ‘old’ body-centered forms, and indeed effectively combine” (9). This clarification echoes that of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (whom Garner frequently cites), who stipulates, in the US context, that the Trump moment does not indicate the end of colorblindness and a return to old-fashioned, Jim Crow racism but demonstrates, rather, how any system of racial oppression “articulate[s] various modes of domination” (xiv). In both American and British neoliberal contexts, in other words, colorblind racism remains ubiquitous even if “it is not the *only* way of maintaining racial order” (Bonilla-Silva xiv, original emphasis).

whites are *as* crucial to the defense of (what is perceived to be) an embattled white supremacy as the scapegoating of nonwhite migrants. As Chris Haylett has argued, the neoliberalization of the British welfare state has always relied on “representations of the white working class” routinely marked by “positions of disparagement or retreat from people who are seen to embody an unsettling mix of whiteness, ‘working-classness’, and poverty” (353). Branded as being prone to idleness, dependency, criminal behavior, racism, excessive sex and pregnancy on behalf of women, and misogynistic violence on behalf of men, these “nonrespectable” working-class and poor whites have, since the 1990s, been characterized through “motif[s] of degeneration” as a symptom of “national decline” and an “embarrassing sign” of what whiteness shorn of middle-class-ness could become (Haylett 353, 358). It is not a coincidence that the terms and tropes used to characterize this group echo those used during Rhys’s time to disparage working-class and poor whites in the metropole and colonies, for as Haylett notes, the discursive construction of Britain’s late-20<sup>th</sup>- and early-21<sup>st</sup>-century white underclass “is racialised in historical origin, referring to working-class groups outside of imperial British society as uncivilised, dangerous, [and] a ‘race apart’” (358). These non-respectable poor and working-class whites threaten the latent “symbolic order of British nationhood where hierarchies of national belonging and privilege are still naturalised by skin colour” (Haylett 361). In a neoliberal, multicultural, supposedly meritocratic society, the alibi for inequality is that poor people, who just happen to be disproportionately people of color, are predisposed to fail because they are embroiled in “cultures of poverty,” while white people succeed because of their supposed penchant for industrious individualism. “When large numbers of people are poor, *and* they are white, that symbolic order starts to break

down ...” (Haylett 361, original emphasis). Since the 1990s, Haylett argues, New Labour’s takeover of neoliberal welfare reform has aimed at resolving these social and symbolic contradictions by bringing the white working-class poor “back into the fold of mainstream society”—not by providing more jobs or benefit increases but by pushing people to “make changes within their own lives” and pull themselves up out of “cultures of unemployment” (364, 362, 364).

It is not just in the administrative discourses of the state and governing elites that class distinctions between whites are serving as a mechanism for the perpetuation of white supremacy in modern Britain. Intra-racial class distinctions are equally if not more pronounced in popular and media discourse. As Imogen Tyler has shown, in contemporary British newspapers, Internet forums, and popular culture, white, class-based, intra-racial demarcations particularly revolve around the figure of the “chav.” Described by one journalist as the epitome of “the UK’s new underclass,” they are “the dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers” who “loiter listlessly on street corners and shopping malls, displaying an apparent lack of education and an all too obvious taste for fighting” (Davidson quoted in Tyler 21). Chav bashing, Tyler argues, is “a means of asserting middle-class identity” through class disgust, but it is also “always racialising” (23, 25). It is a way of managing the boundaries of whiteness:

In a way that bears striking similarities to other national stereotypes of the white poor such as the US “white trash” figure, the chav foregrounds a dirty whiteness—a whiteness contaminated with poverty. This borderline whiteness is evidenced through claims that chavs appropriate black American popular culture ... and have geographical, familial and sexual intimacy with working-class blacks and Asians and immigrant populations. .... Metaphors of disease, invasion, and excessive breeding that are often invoked in white racist responses to immigrants

and ethnic minorities are mobilised in white middle-class accounts of the chavs as a means of differentiating their “respectable whiteness” from that of the lower classes. (Tyler 25-26)<sup>12</sup>

This is one of the reasons why reading Rhys’s fiction through a whiteness-studies framework is so valuable in our sociopolitical moment. Class distinctions between whites are an increasingly frequent and pernicious feature of white supremacy’s contemporary perpetuation. As Steph Lawler observes, white intra-racial class distinctions only cast working-class and poor white people “as the bearers of a problematic and unreflexive form of whiteness” while “[t]he whiteness of the middle classes remains silent, universal, and unmarked” (420, 419). Moreover, the inclusion of certain groups of whites within the predominantly nonwhite segment of British society condemned for lacking “British” values like individualism, hard work, and self-reliance shores up the impression that the neoliberalization of the welfare state and the white xenophobia that attends it are *not* racially discriminatory phenomena because white people are among those being criticized. As one right-wing voter in a study by sociologist James Rhodes states, “‘it’s not that I disapprove of all Pakis, it’s all these that’s not working, and it’s the same with whites, *it’s not just them, it’s whites as well*’” (109, original emphasis). As these forms of intra-racial class distinction become more rampant, our ability to recognize them as facets of white supremacy becomes more dire, and texts like *Midnight* and *Mackenzie* can help

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<sup>12</sup> Such vilification of the non-respectable white poor and working classes is not limited only to “middle-class accounts.” As Steve Garner notes, working-class white interviewees in his own sociological study justified their claims to state resources by emphasizing their respectability in terms of values like work ethic, cleanliness, and strong parenting: “[o]ther white working-class people who d[id] not meet these standards [were] frequently referred to in the same line of argument as new migrants” (63, emphasis added). In his analysis of white voter support for the far-right British National Party (BNP), James Rhodes observes that working-class and lower-middle-class BNP voters distanced themselves *both* from “what was interchangeably termed ‘the “Asian”/Pakistani/Muslim’ population as a group undeserving of [state] resources” *and* from “‘scruffy’ or ‘poor’ whites,” including “single mothers, drug addicts, [and] welfare-dependent ‘dosers’ and ‘alkies’ ... seen as lazy, prone to criminal behaviour,” and thus threatening to “normative assumptions about whiteness” (108, 109).

to sensitize us to the kinds of vocabularies and rhetorics that shore up white supremacy in contexts largely devoid of interracial interactions and conflicts.

Additionally, the underacknowledged forms of behavioral and affective self-discipline revealed by Rhys' tone and style furnish points of departure for *challenging* the rote, neoliberal thinking about the poor as lazy, undisciplined, and over-indulgent that determines so much of the current poverty governance affecting both poor whites and poor people of color and pitting these groups against each other. None of the oversights and hypocrisies in bourgeois reasoning about the poor, and none of the kinds of emotional and behavioral self-discipline identified as routine efforts made in Sasha and Julia's daily life, factor into actual state or popular assessments of how much "deserving" effort is invested by impoverished groups and individuals in attaining social and economic security. Addressing this oversight—in an effort to dismantle white supremacy by destabilizing the neoliberal economic rationalities that sustain it—might begin by adopting the kind of mindset cultivated, I have argued, by Rhys' tone and style: a mindset rid of the impulse to "theorize" about the motives and character of poor individuals and focused, instead, on examining the faulty common-sense notions held about the poor by well-off observers, a mindset receptive to the idea that "hard work" and "self-discipline" might take forms other than the pursuit and maintenance of wage labor. Ultimately, in making these observations about race and whiteness through Rhys' fiction, I am also arguing for the need to be attentive to the ways that race informs interactions and distinctions between whites even less overtly "about" race than the kinds of discourses so astutely analyzed by Haylett, Garner, Rhodes, and others. After all, much of the intra-racial class discourse these scholars examine is quite clearly signaled as being about race

by the explicit references to the unfairly discriminated-against whiteness of the respectable working classes or the embarrassing, compromised whiteness of non-respectable “chavs.”

It is important to note, finally, that if Rhys’ fiction offers prescient insights into the class-based dynamics of white supremacy today, this is not some inexplicable coincidence but rather a matter of historical continuity. Even during its most Keynesian, social-democratic phase in the mid-century moment, the policies of the British welfare state and popular discourse surrounding them were rife with racially discriminatory ideas about immigrants of color (then arriving at high rates in the wake of decolonization) as work-shy benefit scroungers whose claims upon the state warranted harsher scrutiny (Noble 91-120; Longpré 87-88; Craig 612). The white-supremacist policies of the postwar British welfare state were supplemented by others that ensured that white supremacy in post-imperial Britain was distinctly patriarchal. Although the Beveridgean welfare state offered a national social insurance program couched in a rhetoric of universal inclusiveness, postwar British welfare policy was designed with the aim of reinforcing a normative, patriarchal family form in which women remained at home, primarily dependent upon male breadwinners. As Virginia A. Noble has argued, the requirements for participation in the contributions-based national insurance scheme were made more strict for part-time workers, most of whom were married women, and lone women filing for means-tested, non-contributions-based assistance were systematically denied benefits and pressed to seek out estranged lovers, husbands, and ex-husbands for financial support (14-68). In considering how these historical developments might inform our thinking about the welfare state today, Noble stresses the need to *de-exceptionalize*

the present neoliberal conjuncture. The emphasis on spending cuts and disciplinary sanctions *since* Thatcher “creates the impression that the government’s efforts to mold relationships and behavior in a systematic way and minimize state provision in the last quarter of the twentieth century were unprecedented, and that they grew out of the crisis of the welfare state precipitated by economic decline” (145). But even during the postwar period of economic *recovery*, when the British welfare state was not in crisis but in full bloom, it “used rewards, rehabilitation, training, expertise, surveillance, litigation, and threats to shape behavior and conduct” and did so, more importantly, with the specific intent “to instill or reinforce appropriately gendered standards of domesticity and breadwinning, as well as curtail the state’s role in providing cash benefits and other support to non-white immigrants” (Noble 10).<sup>13</sup> In tracking the ways in which sexism and classism against poor Englishwomen could feed into the racial discourses of British colonial rule, Rhys was stressing a point of lasting relevance: while subject to geographically and historically specific manifestations, white supremacy is a power structure that routinely articulates the overtly racist domination of nonwhite groups to the marginalization of certain subsets of white people. Playing out between whites along lines of class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and more, the latter process does not involve racism, but this does not make it irrelevant to the formation and policing of racial identities. Rhys’ keen attention to such dynamics and her tonal and stylistic insistence upon alternative mindsets for thinking about the poor become all the more relevant to

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<sup>13</sup> Seabrook locates the historical precedents of neoliberal welfare reform even further back: “Today’s ‘new poor law,’ although not officially designated as such, owes much to its early nineteenth-century predecessor. The law of less eligibility enshrined in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 – which declared that the worst-paid labourer outside the workhouse should be better off than the most comfortable inmate within the chill embrace of its walls – is resuscitated in the assertion that work, any work, all work, no matter how humiliating or ill-paid, must offer a better life than an existence on welfare” (114).



critics of race and whiteness as neoliberal institutions build upon and intensify class discourses historically tied to white supremacy, framing these in evermore race-neutral terms.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“Owing Nothing to Any Man”: Faulkner, White Debt, and the Language of Moral Finance**

[I]t is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is free—he has set himself free—for higher dreams, for greater privileges.

—James Baldwin, “Faulkner and Desegregation” (209)

He thought quietly: *Not justice; I never asked that; jest fairness ....* That was all; not to have anything for him: just not to have anything against him.

—William Faulkner, *The Mansion* (119)

The preceding chapter on Rhys’ metropolitan fiction located an inconspicuous, under-examined component of British imperialist white supremacy in the gendered forms of class discrimination wielded by bourgeois English men against déclassé English women. In that case, whiteness took the form of the bourgeoisie’s smug identification with economic behaviors and values like hard work, self-discipline, and emotional restraint as well as its efforts to police other white people perceived as lacking these virtues and thus as racially liminal. Rhys portrays these dynamics from the perspective of poor white women on the receiving end of intraracial class condescension, and she illuminates, through her texts’ tone and style, the rhetorical, mental, and social practices poor women use to navigate class and sexual stigma (practices which should also be understood as racialized insofar as they derive from class and gender discourses with white-supremacist stakes). This chapter uncovers another form of white racial discourse embedded in conflicts between middle-class and poor whites, this time in the fiction of William Faulkner. As in the case of Rhys, these forms of whiteness involve the

valorization of certain economic traits, and they play out in novels that center on white characters without calling attention to whiteness as an explicit topic of reflection. Unlike Rhys, however, Faulkner is not critical of the economic virtues being wielded by some whites to distinguish between “good” and “bad” white people. The particular virtue under consideration here is *unindebted-ness*—the proud individualism of being debt-free—and Faulkner’s work, I argue, uncritically celebrates this virtue in ways that bear distinct implications for the perpetuation and dismantling of white supremacy.

Set over a period from the 1890s to 1946, William Faulkner’s *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959) form a trilogy of novels that chronicle Yoknapatawpha County’s decades-long invasion by the Snopes family, a clan of poor white Southerners whose members exhibit a voracious penchant for unscrupulous profiteering and upward mobility. The novels take their names from the path of socioeconomic climbing charted by Flem Snopes, the trilogy’s main antagonist. Beginning as the son of a tenant farmer in the backwater hamlet of Frenchman’s Bend, Flem takes a position as the clerk of a store owned by local landowner and plutocrat Will Varner. There, he learns the ropes of business and commerce before striking out on his own lucrative and unprincipled trade deals. After exhausting his business acumen on the Bend’s un-savvy country folk, Flem moves to the county seat of Jefferson, where, by stealthy manipulation of his own wife, stepdaughter, in-laws, and cousins, he quickly rises from owning a back-alley restaurant to being president of a major bank, crowning this achievement by buying the house of the president he has ousted and remodeling it in the style of an antebellum planter’s mansion. While the trilogy’s final book thus opens with Flem at the peak of his success, it ends with his murder at the hands of two of the

relatives he wronged in the course of his rise to power: his cousin Mink, a tenant farmer who killed his condescending, rich neighbor and seeks revenge on Flem for having not bailed him out of jail, and Flem's stepdaughter Linda, who, out of spite for his cruel manipulation of both herself and her mother (Flem's late wife), expedites Mink's early release from prison and facilitates his escape from the crime scene once he has murdered the man on whom they both wanted revenge.

As a series of disparate episodes narrating Flem's unconscionable business dealings and the resulting acts of vengeance they provoke, the books of the Snopes trilogy are deeply invested in questions about what constitutes proper punishment for wrongdoings. How are the form and extent of punishment and compensation for a wrong determined? Who determines these things, and whose ends do the exacted retributions serve? These questions are crucially foregrounded, for instance, at the end of *The Town*, where Flem's dastardly business machinations culminate in tragic consequences for his wife Eula and her lover Manfred de Spain. Throughout *The Town*, it is largely an open secret in Jefferson that Eula and Manfred are having an affair, but at the end of the novel, Flem officially blows the lid off the matter as part of a long-brewing plot to blackmail Eula's father Will Varner into using his bank stock to vote Flem from vice president to president of the bank. Concerned about how her now-publicized adultery will affect her daughter Linda (Flem's stepdaughter), Eula attempts to buy the town's forgiveness by committing suicide, leaving Manfred behind, companionless and, as the bank president Flem has just ousted, jobless as well. Such is *The Town's* denouement, and while the scandal and intrigue at the level of the story are compelling, it is Faulkner's language at the level of discourse that I want to stress. Here is Charles "Chick" Mallison, one of the

novel's recurring homodiegetic narrators, reflecting on what is left for Manfred in the aftermath of these events and why he will have to leave town:

I know that we—Jefferson—all knew that he had lost the bank. ... [A]fter this, Mr de Spain himself wouldn't stay. In a way, he *owed* that not just to the memory of his dead love, his dead mistress; he *owed* that to Jefferson too. Because he had outraged us. He had ... flouted the morality of marriage which decreed that a man and a woman cant sleep together without a certificate from the police .... [T]hey already hated him twice: once for doing it, once for not getting caught at it .... But that would be nothing to the hatred he would get if, after his guilty partner had *paid* with her life for her share of the crime, he didn't even lose that key to the back door of the bank to *pay* for his. (*The Town* 354-355, emphases added)

Chick's recourse to financial rhetoric as a means of justifying these punishments is uniform yet troubled. On the one hand, there is a desire to see things in black and white, to see it as obvious that payment in some form must be made for outraging the Jefferson community and that where Eula has paid by suicide, Manfred can do so by exile. On the other hand, one senses that Chick himself does not fully buy this reasoning. His bathetic gloss on "the morality of marriage" as the decree that "a man and a woman cant sleep together without a certificate from the police" injects a dose of mocking irony into his narration, and the pronominal slippage halfway through the passage, from "he had outraged *us*" to "*they* already hated him," further suggests that he does not endorse the town's punitive calculus so much as stand judgmentally outside of it.

Indeed, as Chick goes on to suggest, what is at stake in making Eula pay for her crimes is not so much the integrity of civic institutions or the moral fabric of the Jefferson community as it is the ability of that community to feel good about itself, to feel at once inviolably sovereign and mercifully forgiving. After Eula's death, the town places a wreath on the bank door, ostensibly in condolence to Manfred, yet "that wreath," Chick maintains, "was not the myrtle of grief ... [but] the laurel of victory," a "dangling chunk

of black tulle and artificial flowers” that expressed not mournfulness over Eula’s death but the “public triumph of virtue proved once more supreme and invincible” (354). In fact, despite its conservative moral standards having driven Eula to suicide, Jefferson, Chick observes, proceeded to *congratulate* itself for graciously accepting her suicide as payment for taking her daughter into the fold. Up to the point of her mother’s death, Linda had not known that Flem was not her real father (though she does divine this shortly thereafter). As a service paid for by the coin of Eula’s life, the community tacitly agrees to protect Linda’s ego by “keep[ing] any part of the guessing or suspecting or actual knowing” of her parentage “from ever reaching her” (357). So really, Chick wryly remarks, the town “forgave Mrs Snopes” (356).

[T]hey could even forgive themselves for condoning adultery by forgiving it, by reminding themselves ... that if she had not been an abomination before God ..., she wouldn’t have reached the point where she would have to choose death in order to leave her child a mere suicide for a mother instead of a whore. (356-357)

As a rhetorical device for expressing a particular understanding of wrongdoing and punishment, the language of finance often conveys a sense of dispassionate fairness and objectivity (he “*owed* that to Jefferson,” for she “*paid* with her life”). However, as Chick’s narration at the end of *The Town* suggests, that seemingly objective language of paying one’s dues and settling accounts can also be used to lend an air of righteous equanimity to moral calculations in fact shot through with the biases and interests of those doing the accounting.

This chapter uses Faulkner’s Snopes trilogy—particularly, its final book, *The Mansion*—to assess the affordances and, especially, the limitations of using financial rhetoric to describe the moral, historical, and material dimensions of white racial identity.

Specifically, it assesses the uses and limits of the idea of “white debt” as a conceptual and rhetorical device for articulating why white people should feel motivated to engage in racial justice movements and what the stakes of that engagement, for them, would be. As a goad to political action, the phrase “white debt” suggests that white people owe to people of color both material compensation and some form of moral compunction (tied to a significant change in behavior and self-perception) for past acts of racial oppression. In the United States, this is especially understood as pertaining to what white people owe African Americans for the history and ongoing legacies of slavery and Jim Crow. “White debt” implies, of course, an understanding that debt is bad—that the moral and material debt incurred by white people’s history as a social group compromises their moral character and that by engaging in racial justice movements, they can claim better moral standing in the eyes of themselves and others. Especially in recent years, discussions of white debt have been an increasingly familiar feature of public discussion and national debate. Though not using the exact phrase, Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his 2014 *Atlantic* article “The Case for Reparations,” has given wide notoriety to the idea the phrase represents: “An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens,” he writes, “is improved and humane.” In 2015, the essayist Eula Biss published a piece in *The New York Times Magazine* titled, precisely, “White Debt” and subtitled: “Reckoning with what is owed—and what can never be repaid—for racial privilege.” There is, of course, abundant reason for why African Americans and white liberals (the former for centuries, the latter more recently) have been invoking a language of racialized debt within political debate. From slavery to Reconstruction to redlining and housing covenants and the subprime mortgage crisis, the United States has systematically and violently extracted labor and withheld

property from black people since its founding, and it has never issued, at the federal level, any apology or system of material reparations acknowledging and taking responsibility for this fact. The concept of white debt—implied if not explicitly named in reparations arguments—has been a key part of how black people have preserved a memory of this willfully forgotten truth and insisted on accountability for it by white Americans and the U.S. government. By corroborating the idea of white debt themselves, anti-racist white people are making an important gesture of solidarity with black struggles against white supremacy.

As I contend in this chapter, however, the language of white debt, *as* it has been invoked by white people, is not without its problems, and these problems are related to a set of affective and ideological tendencies that can accompany the use of financial rhetoric as a way of talking about racial inequality and dynamics of its projected resolution. These tendencies, I suggest, are clearly and instructively evident in *The Mansion*, the final book of Faulkner's Snopes trilogy, whose main plotline is Mink Snopes' pursuit of revenge against Flem. Throughout the novel, Faulkner frames Mink's revenge plot through an ongoing financial conceit. He figures Flem's death as the long-awaited payment of an outstanding moral debt and Mink's vengeance as a balancing of moral accounts. In Part I of this chapter, I make the first of two overall arguments: the financial rhetoric that Faulkner uses to frame *The Mansion's* narrative of justice is marked by two affective and ideological impulses: 1) a constant anticipation of historical closure as the immediate result of debt repayment and 2) a related fetishization of unencumbered, history-less individualism as the ultimate payoff and endpoint of reckoning with past injustice. Faulkner's financial rhetoric, in other words, constantly



projects an imminent future in which forgiveness for past moral crimes is achieved and the record of those crimes is consigned to a “settled,” cordoned-off, no-longer-mentioned past. It is a rhetoric that tends toward an ethos of individualism and reconciliation. I make this argument through an extensive close reading of *The Mansion* in the first half of Part I. Then, in Part I’s second half, I turn to the essays, speeches, and public letters that Faulkner wrote in the years surrounding *The Mansion*’s publication (i.e., the late 1950s, during the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement) in order to show that his thinking about debt was intimately tied to his thinking about race. As with the example from *The Town* above, the particular conflicts that Faulkner, throughout the Snopes trilogy, uses the rhetoric of finance to frame are all conflicts between white characters, which can produce the impression that novels like *The Town* and *The Mansion* have no racial stakes. However, as my engagement with Faulkner’s nonfiction will show, his entire vocabulary of debt, accountability, and repayment is informed by a set of effectively white-supremacist beliefs and values: a strong disinclination to talk about the past (linked to a Cold-War sense that racial harmony was crucial to America’s ability to fight communism) and a fundamental assumption that hard-working, debt-free, self-made individualism is not just the sine qua non of upstanding moral character but a character trait foreign to “the Negro” and exemplified by white people. Faulkner, it should be noted, maintained these values and beliefs while still considering himself a political liberal (or at least moderate) ultimately supportive of black Americans’ struggles for equality and civil rights. His financially figured preoccupations with historical closure and unencumbered individualism are thus hardly race-neutral traits. They represent,

rather, affective and ideological tendencies by which white supremacy creeps back into his ostensibly anti-white-supremacist thinking and writing.

In Part II, I make the second, overall argument of this chapter: that the particular kind of closure- and individualism-oriented rhetoric of debt and repayment exemplified by Faulkner's fiction continues to inform the ways in which white debt is invoked and understood by white people today. I demonstrate this claim both through a reading of Biss' "White Debt" essay and, more extensively, through an engagement with scholarship on reparations to African Americans, formerly colonized peoples, and indigenous peoples still living under settler-colonial occupation. Expectations of historical closure and of morally vindicated individualism continue to underwrite contemporary efforts by white people and white governmental institutions at reckoning with their own histories of racial oppression. These expectations have led, in the context of reparations for colonialism, to premature declarations about the "end" of white supremacy and how the horrors of colonization are closed chapters of a national past. A similar pattern of inauspicious, hastily declared racial harmony also threatens to undermine efforts at reparations to African Americans (federal reparations for black people in the United States have still not yet been made, but I base this contention on the features of some of the models for black reparations already proposed by scholars). In the most insightful and circumspect reflections on white debt—such as Biss'—this preoccupation with historical closure and redeemed, white individualism is faint yet palpable nonetheless, and it speaks to the danger of white-debt rhetoric, if not subject to vigilant scrutiny, to perpetuate a mode of white investment in anti-racist politics in which white people's anxious concern about their own moral standing is tacitly prioritized over

the goal of rendering people of color moral and material compensation adequate to their long-endured oppressions. After tracing these Faulknerian, affective and ideological tendencies into white-debt rhetoric in the present, I close by offering some reflections on what it would mean and what it would look like for white people to develop a sense of race-based moral indebtedness *not* informed—not sidetracked—by anxious anticipation of a future when they will be done owing people of color accountability for the past. How, I ask, might white people learn to *embrace* the idea of their group-based moral indebtedness rather than seek reassurance of individual moral goodness?

Before turning to *The Mansion*, I want to offer a few brief clarifications about my major claims and stakes. First, it is not my intent in this chapter to dismiss the language of white debt as a means of galvanizing white people’s engagement in racial justice movements. I do not seek to reject that language entirely but to ask what kinds of calibrations it might need to ensure (let alone maximize) its intended anti-racist effect. Second, for reasons of space and because of the particular demographics engaged specifically by Faulkner’s oeuvre, my discussions of white debt remain, for the most part, discussions about what white people owe to African Americans. This does not account for the fact that any true understanding of white debt in America would include the moral and material debts owed to indigenous people for both land appropriation and physical and cultural genocide. A more targeted and thorough exploration of the nexus between whiteness and indigeneity is provided in this project’s final chapter on Willa Cather. Here, while I sometimes use the term “people of color” where it seems appropriate regarding observations or contentions of broad relevance, I mostly refer to African Americans as the primary group to whom white debt is owed, largely as a way reflecting

the focus of my literary and theoretical sources. Finally, I want to be clear that in critiquing a concept like white debt—already rooted in anti-white-supremacist thinking by white and nonwhite people alike—I do not mean to engage in an unproductive, lefter-than-thou, call-out culture but to rather encourage a network of mutual accountability amongst anti-racist white people. One’s status as a white ally can be buttressed by learning from, without condescending to, the political oversights of other whites. These might be contemporaries or white people in the past—like Faulkner—who sought to articulate positions of white solidarity with black struggle but did so with instructively limited success.

## I

Faulkner’s *Snopes* trilogy constitutes an extensive portrayal of the social and economic transformations that affected the post-Reconstruction South. Particularly prominent among these changes was the rise of finance capital and its repercussions on Southern culture and society. As the historian Don H. Doyle observes, in the period from the 1870s to the early-twentieth century, a “new merchant-creditor class” emerged as a “major force in the southern rural economy and rival to the planter class” (310). These financiers acquired land and property by foreclosing on unmet debts, typically those of struggling farmers who offered their land as collateral for credit (Doyle 310-311). Flem Snopes is a ruthless incarnation of this emerging class. Throughout the trilogy, Faulkner associates him not just with capitalism in general but with finance specifically as a burgeoning mode of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century capital accumulation. At the level of plot, Flem’s business ventures involve a deft array of maneuvers around

promissory notes, mortgages, and bank stocks, yet the role of finance in the Snopes trilogy extends beyond the level of story and into the realm of discourse. Even when a particular scene or episode does not directly involve Flem's financial practices, Faulkner's homodiegetic narrators cannot help but describe him in financial terms. Chick calls Flem a "son of a bitch who had a vocabulary of two words, one being No and the other Foreclosure (*Mansion* 239). After Flem's murder, Gavin Stevens—Chick's uncle and another one of the novel's homodiegetic narrators—notes that "He (the deceased) had no auspices ... fraternal, civic, nor military: only finance; not an economy—cotton or cattle or anything else which Yoknapatawpha County and Mississippi were established on and kept running by, but belonging simply to Money" (*Mansion* 461).

Such disdainful comments, coupled with Flem's unambiguous status as the trilogy's main antagonist, make it tempting to read finance in these novels as a set of corrupt ideas and practices synonymous with greed and injustice. In the long arc of the trilogy, however, finance ultimately serves not as a force of categorical evil but as a kind of pharmakon—it is both poison and cure. Wielded by Flem as a material practice, finance is a source of extortion and rapine. But wielded by Faulkner as a representational trope, financial thinking functions in the trilogy's final book as a template for justice. In *The Mansion*, I argue, Faulkner uses financial rhetoric to coax readers into viewing the series of vengeful and punitive actions comprising the novel's story as just. He attributes a positive moral valence to financial language and logic by crafting a narrative in which the rhetoric of debt and accounting structures the story of the villainous Flem's retributive demise. If the punishments meted out to Eula and Manfred at the end of *The Town* exemplify a financially-figured justice gone awry (excessive in its outcomes and

misplaced insofar as Flem escapes scrutiny), this is not Faulkner implying that financial thinking is incompatible with justice but rather Faulkner charging one final debit to his antagonist's outstanding moral tab. At the end of *The Town*, Flem's moral debt is compounded and remains unpaid; by the end of *The Mansion*, he *will* be held accountable for his moral crimes.

Though composed of numerous loosely connected episodes, *The Mansion's* principal plot and through line is Flem's death at the hands of his cousin Mink. The novel begins around 1923 with Mink 15 years into serving a 20-year prison sentence for the murder of his imperious, rich neighbor Zack Houston. That murder is originally narrated in *The Hamlet*, but in the first chapter of *The Mansion*, Faulkner re-tells the same events with a shift in point of view designed to make Mink into a more sympathetic character and reposition him as the hero (or rather antihero) of the trilogy's final book. Where Mink is portrayed in *The Hamlet* as short-tempered, menacing, and confrontational, in re-telling the murder at the outset of *The Mansion*, Faulkner re-characterizes him as a long-suffering, ordinarily patient and uncomplaining man accustomed to stomaching a tenant farmer's economic drudgery yet pushed by years of uncalled-for condescension to a point where it was impossible for him not to retaliate and still maintain his dignity. Mink, however, fully acknowledges the severity of his crime and accepts his prison sentence with patience and compliant behavior. The only hitch is that he still bears a grudge against Flem, who, with so much money on hand, should have bailed his cousin out of jail (Mink reasons) out of sheer deference to "the ancient immutable laws of simple blood kinship" (*Mansion* 5). This grudge is exacerbated early in the novel when Flem—clearly aware that Mink will try to kill him when he gets out—bribes another Snopes sentenced

to the same prison, Montgomery Ward, to trick Mink into dressing up in women's clothing and attempting a jail break that predictably fails and adds 20 more years to his sentence. In a calm reply that captures Mink's characteristic mix of infinite patience and vengeful resolve, he tells Montgomery Ward to relay a message to Flem upon his release: "“Tell him he hadn't ought to used that dress. But it dont matter. If I had made it out then, maybe I would a changed. But I reckon I wont now. I reckon I'll jest wait”" (96).

From the very beginning of *The Mansion*, Faulkner frames this core revenge plot in terms of an ongoing financial conceit. In waiting out his prison sentence and abiding the obstacles that impede his quest for vengeance after release, Mink subscribes to what we might call a financial faith that there is some force in the universe which keeps tabs on how many blows every man suffers in his life and ensures that every dog has his day (or rather, gets his due):

He meant, simply, that *them—they—it*, whichever and whatever you wanted to call it, who represented a simple fundamental justice and equity in human affairs, or else a man might just as well quit; the *they, them, it* ... which simply would not, could not harass and harry a man forever without someday, at some moment, letting him get his own just and equal licks back in return. They could harass and worry him, or They could even just sit back and watch everything go against him ... sit back and watch and—all right, why not? he—a man—didn't mind, as long as he was a man and there was a justice to it—enjoy it too .... But at least that moment would come when it was his turn, when he had earned the right to have his own just and equal licks back, ... and They dared not, They would not dare, to let him down, else it would be as hard for Them to live with themselves afterward as it had finally become for him to live with himself and still keep taking what he had taken from Zack Houston. (*Mansion* 6-7, original emphases)

Positioning and elaborating this philosophy at the outset of the novel, Faulkner attempts to prime readers with a particular moral sensibility for interpreting the text. Mink's financial faith equates "justice and equity in human affairs" with the *discharging* of all

moral debts. The world is at its most “just,” this reasoning goes, when no one owes anything to anyone anymore, and once this settling of moral accounts is achieved, there are to be *no hard feelings* over anything that has happened in the past. The forces that be have racked up a debt to Mink by having been content to “sit back and watch everything go against him,” but so long as there is eventually “a justice to it” (him getting the “licks” he is owed “back in return”), then he can and will *forgive* Them—“all right, why not?”—for having stacked the deck against him and “enjoy[ed] it too.” Embedded in this financial logic is a teleological model of justice: all debts must be paid, and when they are paid, there should be no grudges for whatever occasioned indebtedness in the first place.

Mink can safely expect this superhuman “They” to honor the debt They owe him because “They” are not really superhuman. “They” are just Mink. That “*them—they—it*, whichever and whatever you wanted to call it,” is a projection of his own belief in moral accountability into (or onto) the world. Faulkner does not open *The Mansion* with a metaphysical statement of faith that the universe really is governed by mysterious forces that are ultimately “good.” Nor is he asking readers to reflect on what actually existing social body, what nonfiction referent with the power to afflict or affirm society’s underdogs, “They” might index as a metaphor. Rather, *The Mansion* opens with a portrait of a man who believes so strongly in people paying their dues—in earning contentment through patient endurance, owning the consequences of one’s actions, and being adequately *rewarded* for such scruples—that he imaginatively populates the world with gods that personify his beliefs. That They “would not dare” to let Mink down is a testament not to Their scrupulosity but to his, and showcasing this staunch and ennobling



belief in accountability is Faulkner's principal strategy for re-casting the murderous Mink as the novel's quasi-heroic agent of justice. As Enrique García Díez has argued, "It is Mink's sense of honour which redeems him [in Faulkner's view] from being a common outlaw and which makes him the implicit hero of *The Mansion*" (38). That "sense of honour," I am suggesting, is decidedly financial: it takes the form of a commitment to debt accountability as an absolute principle, to patiently paying one's dues and getting, in turn, what one is owed.

As Erik Dussere has observed, based on their claims to numerical objectivity and their emphasis on the idea of balancing and balances, the forms and practices of financial accounting have historically served to signal the ethicality of the marketplace and private enterprise (16-17). The incorporation of financial forms into narrative serves the same ethicality-signaling function in Faulkner's fiction. As evidenced most famously by Ike McCaslin's harrowing encounter with the plantation ledgers in *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner uses financial forms to signal the extent to which at least some of his white male characters are deeply troubled by the legacy of slavery and attempt to hold themselves accountable for it. As Dussere correctly notes, however, Faulkner's attempts to represent and engage the past through financial concepts like accounting, debt, and repayment tend to devolve, especially in his more canonical fictions, into feeble broodings over history as an "unbearable burden" under which cynical, despairing whites opt for "self-sacrifice in a tragic and inevitably failed attempt to compensate in themselves for the sins of their fathers" (Dussere 7). (One thinks of Quentin Compson's suicide or of Ike rejecting his inheritance of the McCaslin plantation.) Although Faulkner's financial tropes convey attempts to reflect on "how the legacies of slavery linger in the lives and actions of [his]

characters,” his engagements with the question of racial debt are severely limited because they remain self-pityingly preoccupied with the “agonizings of Southern whites” (Dussere 13, 18).

*The Mansion*, however, proves an exception to this trend. In the final book of the Snopes trilogy, Faulkner’s recourse to financial logic and the language of moral debt does not produce characters debilitated by guilt or plotlines of tragically failed compensation for the sins of the past. Flem is held fully accountable for his depravity, and he is brought to justice by the effective actions of willful individuals. As Blair Labatt contends, contrary to a rote, modernist view of Faulknerian character and plot as defined by “ineffective” actions and “indeterminate” events, “Faulkner affirms the possibilities of agency” in *The Mansion* and expresses conviction in “the independence, vitality, and growth of [his] characters” (xv, 135). To some extent, this deviation is easily explained. If brooding, inactive, white self-pity is typically associated with plotlines that involve some form of confrontation with the legacy of slavery, then there is no reason why such despairing inactivity would permeate *The Mansion*, for the novel’s major conflicts do not revolve around reckoning with slavery’s repercussions. By this account, the achievability of justice and the efficacy of individual actions in the novel would be linked to the way in which Faulkner’s late fiction “moves away from racial issues,” as Dussere puts it, and “concentrates primarily on the conflict between Southern and Northern value systems and between social classes in the New South” (77). By shifting the source of conflict to the unconscionable business dealings of a single financier—one still alive in the story’s present and thus accessible to social agents who might bring him to account—Faulkner sets himself a more manageable problem in *The Mansion* than the towering sins of the

slaveholding fathers and the legacies of incest, rape, and miscegenation they have produced. However, while the story of Flem's rise and fall does foreground conflicts between social classes and values systems in the New South, it is *not* true, as Dussere implies, that foregrounding such conflicts entailed a move "away from racial issues" on Faulkner's behalf. In the years leading up to *The Mansion*'s writing and publication, Faulkner was deeply engaged in the racial debates surrounding the Civil Rights Movement, and as I will later show, many of the ideas and values he used to frame conservative discussions of race in his nonfiction thoroughly inform *The Mansion*'s narrative discourse even though the novel's story is not about racial conflict and features an almost entirely white cast of characters. Faulkner did not "move[] away" from racial issues in *The Mansion*; he incorporated them in less obvious, less conscious ways. The novel's financial rhetoric is the key to unearthing this buried racial subtext.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand how *The Mansion*'s discourse of debt and accountability embeds and advocates Faulkner's conservative racial views, two features of this discourse must be emphasized. On the one hand, the novel's rhetoric of debt and

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<sup>1</sup> In a revised and expanded version of this dissertation chapter, this would be the opportune moment to include a more thorough literature review of the ways in which race has been discussed so far in Faulkner studies. Based on some of the initial research I had started to do while working on the project, it seems that a situation similar to the one I described with regard to Rhys studies in my previous chapter holds true for Faulkner criticism as well. There is plenty of analysis of race in Faulkner studies, but those discussions are largely confined to a certain set of canonical novels that are forthrightly "about" race insofar they centralize interracial conflicts, feature many black characters, and thematize slavery and miscegenation. These are novels like *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom! Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses* (the "Voyage in the Darks" and "Wide Sargasso Seas," so to speak, of Faulkner's oeuvre). There is a large body of Faulkner scholarship that examines race in his work by focusing on figures of blackness and deciphering the ways these encode white anxieties, fears, and fantasies—the kind of racial analysis advocated by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*. Novels like the Snopes Trilogy, however, tend to be overlooked as texts where racial identities and discourses are being worked out because they are filled with all or almost entirely white casts of characters. I would need to go through and more thoroughly read the criticism to which I am gesturing here before citing it outright (criticism that I have mostly only been able to skim or flip through while writing this dissertation), but this provides a sense of what a fuller literature review for this chapter would probably look like.

accountability attests to what Labatt has identified as Faulkner's convictions about individual agency: his belief in the capacity and necessity of individuals to hold themselves and others accountable for wrongdoing through volitional acts that advance or impede the righting of wrongs. On the other hand, in addition to this philosophical valence, *The Mansion's* financial rhetoric also serves an ongoing formal and affective purpose: it perpetually hints at the *sense of an ending* in which moral accounts will be settled and—the books having balanced—all grudges and obligations will be eliminated. *The Mansion's* financial rhetoric is geared toward the enactment of narrative and emotional *closure*. This formal and affective orientation is evident from the start of the novel, where Mink's beliefs about "Them" and the moral accountability They embody encode, as I have suggested, a strict demand for debt repayment as well as an injunction against hard feelings after debts are repaid. These two principles—unsparing accountability and ultimate forgiveness—are conspicuously enshrined in *The Mansion's* climax and denouement.

After his release from prison in the final section of the novel, and with nothing for morale other than his undying faith that They will eventually give him the licks he owed, a 63-year-old Mink travels to Memphis where he procures from a pawn shop an incredibly shoddy pistol and a few equally shoddy bullets to carry out a revenge coded by Faulkner as the bringing of Flem to justice. After finally making it back to Jefferson, Mink slips into Flem's mansion under cover of night, where he finds Flem alone and holds him at gunpoint. With only three bullets to spare, two of them misfire before They pay Their dues, and the third bullet lands a kill, but what is curious about the scene of the murder is that Flem makes no show resistance. After the first misfire, he merely "sit[s]

immobile and even detached,” watching Mink fumble to set up the next shot, and after that one misfires, too, Flem is described, again, as “not moving at all” (456). Based on the evidence of the shoddy old pistol and the number of shells left at the crime scene, V.K. Ratliff—the novel’s third, final, and shrewdest homodiegetic narrator—deduces what must have occurred during the confrontation, and he hits the nail on the head when he asks Gavin Stevens, in the novel’s last chapter, “[W]hat do you reckon Flem’s reason was for setting there in that chair letting Mink snap them two shells at him until one of them went off and killed him?” (472). Still reeling over the news that Linda, his Platonic love interest, has helped Mink escape after the murder, Gavin is not only uninterested in the question but unwilling to talk about it. But Ratliff has a theory, and while he and Gavin drive around the county in search of the fugitive Mink at the end of the book, he lays it out for consideration:

“You was town-raised when you was a boy; likely you never heard of Give-me-lief. It was a game we played. You would pick another boy about your own size and you would walk up to him with a switch or maybe a light stick or a hard green apple or maybe even a rock, depending on how hard a risk you wanted to take, and say to him, “Gimme lief,” and if he agreed, he would stand still and you would take one cut or one lick at him with the switch or stick, as hard as you picked out, or back off and throw at him once with the green apple or the rock. Then you would stand still and he would take the same switch or apple or rock or anyways another jest like it, and take one cut or throw at you. That was the rule. So jest suppose—”

“Drive on!” Stevens said.

“—Flem had had his lief fair and square like the rule said, so there wasn’t nothing for him to do but jest set there ....” (*Mansion* 472-473)

Ratliff’s theory offers narrative closure by constructing Flem’s passivity as a final balancing act, an ultimate settling of moral accounts in which the man who had sacrificed all moral scruples to the pursuit of individual profit submits, in the end, to paying for all the “lief” he has taken by giving Mink “lief” to take his life. To some extent, this might

read as a discrepancy in character believability. After three novels' worth of Flem's dastardly profiteering, this moral 180 seems unrealistic. The theory, however, would be easier to dismiss if it came from anyone other than Ratliff, who consistently serves not just in *The Mansion* but in all three books of the trilogy as Faulkner's most shrewd and reliable narrator, and the speciousness of the "Give-me-lief" theory is somewhat attenuated if we note that it hardly casts Flem as a good person but rather as just a marginally less bad one—not so depraved as to have no sense of accountability whatsoever but still depraved enough to put off paying for his crimes as long as possible so that he can enjoy the spoils of his financial scheming for the full duration of his life without allowing any sense of his own turpitude to limit his manipulative extortions along the way. In a kind of live-by-sword-die-by-the-sword financial mentality, Flem, it turns out, had been accounting for his accruing moral debt throughout all the years he had been foreclosing on others through material credit. Ratliff's "Give-me-life" theory guides the reader to this conclusion. After risking a lifetime of investment in unconscionable and universally begrudged acts of speculation, even Flem himself viewed death at Mink's hands as the warranted end to a long and exorbitant run: "fair and square like the rule said," bubble and crash.

As if to ensure that readers do not miss the poetic justice here—the financial character of the logic behind the financier's undoing—Faulkner has Ratliff refer *back*, when articulating this "Give-me-lief" theory, to an earlier moment in the novel that likewise emphasizes the inexorable payment of moral debts as the underlying theme of Flem's story. Picking up from where Ratliff, in the preceding passage, leaves off: "jest suppose ... Flem had had his lief fair and square like the rule said, so there wasn't

nothing for him to do but jest set there, since he had likely found out years back when she finally turned up here again even outen a communist war, that he had already lost” (473). The “she” to whom Ratliff refers is Flem’s stepdaughter Linda, who, after discovering Flem’s role in her mother’s suicide, left for New York City at the end of *The Town* but “turned up” again in Jefferson by the middle of *The Mansion*. In the interim, she had married a communist then lost him when they aided Republican forces together in the Spanish Civil War, and upon her return to Jefferson, she had begun to engage in radical politics, such as promoting education for black Southerners, which jeopardized her stepfather’s reputation with the town. Despite their resulting in a burning cross on his lawn and “the words *Nigger lover* scrawled huge in chalk on [his] sidewalk,” Flem, however, made no efforts to stop his stepdaughter’s activities (*Mansion* 250). The motivations behind this disinclination puzzle the town, but just as Faulkner offers readers Ratliff’s theory to help make sense of Flem’s passivity at gunpoint, he uses Chick at this midpoint in the novel to hint at why Flem resigns himself to Linda’s radicalism: “All you could do was speculate,” Chick muses, “on just what I.O.U. or mortgage bearing his signature she might have represented out of that past which had finally gained for him that back room in the bank where he could sit down and watch himself grow rich by lending and foreclosing other people’s I.O.U.’s” (*Mansion* 252). By figuring Linda as the living embodiment of a financial claim out of Flem’s past, Chick frames Flem’s resignation to the effects of her radicalism as an act of moral-debt amortization. Ratliff’s “Give-me-lief” theory *reprises* this financial conceit, bringing to fruition the seed of debt-accountability-as-moral-principle originally planted through Mink’s ideas about “Them” at the start of the novel and watered, halfway through, by this image of Linda-as-I.O.U.

After organizing the petition for Mink's early release from prison and guiding him out of the house once he has murdered her stepfather, Linda leaves Jefferson in a shiny new Jaguar she had obviously ordered long in advance, but before departing, she asks Gavin to deliver a sum of money to Mink as a kind of fee or patronage for the poor soul she used to achieve her revenge. Unsure where Mink has gone, Gavin enlists the help of Ratliff, who conjectures—correctly, as usual—that Mink will have gone back to the small plot of land where he used to live before he murdered Houston and went to prison. The two make their way to the rundown hovel that used to be Mink's home (during which drive Ratliff lays out his Give-me-lief theory), and there, “on a crude platform he had heaped together” in what used to be a cellar, “the man they sought half-squatted half-knelt blinking up at them like a child” (475). This infantilized figuration of Mink as harmless, pitiful, and innocent signals the kind of *forgiving* affect that Faulkner will solicit from readers toward Mink at the end of the text. If Flem's death and Ratliff's explanation of it provide readers with a financially-figured sense of narrative closure, the treatment of Mink in the novel's final pages confirms that the sense of closure being offered is not just narrative but also affective. The rhetorical discourse through which Faulkner narrates the end of the story works to defuse any negative feelings toward Mink that readers might hold because of his status as a two-time murderer. This becomes especially clear in the novel's final paragraphs once Gavin has relayed Linda's money and he and Ratliff depart, leaving Mink alone as our sole and final focalizer.

“*I'm free now. I can walk any way I want to*” (477, original emphasis). Freedom is the overarching refrain of Mink's closing thoughts and of Faulkner's concluding narration, a refrain which suggests that until this point, Mink has in some way not been



free. This is true in a literal sense insofar as he has been in prison for 38 years of his life, but in order fully to understand the discourse of freedom at *The Mansion*'s close, it is necessary to circle back to the beginning of the text. As part of a stoic strategy for inuring himself to his downtrodden, tenant farmer's condition, Mink had never allowed himself to wish for anything so audacious as "justice" from the world: "He thought quietly: *Not justice; I never asked for that; jest fairness, that's all*. That was all; not to have anything for him: just not to have anything against him" (104, 119, original emphases). This sense of having always been faced with a stacked deck—of everything always going against him—is the basis, of course, of Mink's ideas about "Them," but it also informs another trope that Faulkner establishes early in the text and carries to the end as a running conceit. With his quality of life before prison forever tied to the fecundity of the soil, Mink had developed an antagonistic relationship to the earth itself, "the ground, the dirt which any and every tenant-farmer and share-cropper knew to be his sworn foe and mortal enemy" (100). "It was the land itself which owned them," he thinks of his tenant-farming kind, "the earth itself passing their doomed indigence and poverty from holding to holding of its thralldom as a family or a clan does a hopelessly bankrupt tenth cousin" (102). Picking up on the term "bankrupt" as a description for the tenant farmer's "hopelessly" indebted status, the earth itself becomes a banker in this financial metaphor, trading on the farmer's debt as a financial security to be reinvested "from holding to holding." Faulkner reactivates this conceit of the earth-as-claims-holder at the end of the novel while Mink travels to Jefferson to kill Flem. Every time he stops to rest, Mink contrives some way to avoid sleeping directly on the ground: "That was the danger, what a man had to watch against: once you laid flat on the ground, right away the earth started

in to draw you back down into it” (442). After sleeping one night in the bed of a truck owned by a farmer whose harvest he assisted earlier that afternoon, Mink decides while contemplating where to sleep the night thereafter that he could “*risk* the ground once more, this late, this last time, especially as he had last night in the cotton truck *on the credit side*” (447, emphases added). The financial character of Mink’s logic and, by extension, that of Faulkner’s narrative is thus constantly highlighted, and it is this language of risk and debt that Faulkner uses to signal the recapitulation of earlier themes at the novel’s close.

When Gavin and Ratliff depart after delivering Linda’s money, Mink is left alone “except for the old ground,” which is there, as usual, “waiting, pulling gently and without no hurry at him between every step, saying, Come on, lay down; I aint going to hurt you”—which Mink does, for as the narrator tells us, “he was free now, he could *afford to risk it*” (477, emphasis added). This newfound ability of being able to take a risk marks the achievement, finally, if not of justice then at least of fairness (to use Mink’s formulation): not of having anything for him but of not having anything against him. It signifies the sense of a fair game, of no longer playing against a stacked deck—or rather, the sense of a clean slate, for what Mink’s sense of freedom really connotes is the feeling of being *absolved*, of being released from some kind of pressure, obligation, or stigma that has dragged him down his entire life. The source of that absolution is neither “They” nor the ground itself but Faulkner, who uses his narrative discourse at the end of the novel to perform a forgiveness toward Mink as murderer that he likewise urges upon readers. Consider the novel’s closing paragraph, which suggests with incredibly florid

and effusive prose that upon risking the ground's invitation to lay down, the beleaguered Mink is finally *rewarded* the peace of death:

he could feel the Mink Snopes that had had to spend so much of his life just having unnecessary bother and trouble, beginning to creep, seep, flow easy as sleeping ... down and down into the ground already full of the folks that had the trouble but were free now, ... all mixed and jumbled up comfortable and easy so wouldn't nobody even know or even care who was which anymore, himself among them, equal to any, good as any, brave as any, being inextricable from, anonymous with all of them: the beautiful, the splendid, the proud and the brave, right on up to the very top itself among the shining phantoms ... which are the milestones of the long human recording—Helen and the bishops, the kings and the unhomed angels, the scornful and graceless seraphim. (478)

The magnanimous tone of this ending is hard to miss. If Flem's death after a lifetime of immoral business deals is figured as a discharging of moral debts, Faulkner's treatment of Mink after the murder accounts for the latter's vengeance not as an act of violence that leaves him morally in the red but as an act of violence that has *already been paid for* by a lifetime of "unnecessary bother and trouble." Mink is allowed to claim over 20 years of tenant-farming indigence and 38 years of prison time as a write-off, so to speak, against whatever moral tax he incurs for not one but two murders, with the result being, in Faulkner's calculations, that *everything balances out*. Whether Mink asked for justice or not, his actions (aided by Linda's) have brought justice about for Flem's wrongdoings, and it is only fair, given everything else he has been through (Faulkner seems to say), that we begrudge him no further. *The Mansion* thus concludes with what Labatt rightly calls a "suspension of judgment" (160). Mink and the entire history of betrayal, extortion, and vengeance he represents are quite literally laid to rest after a final reckoning that has called Flem to account, balanced the moral books, and produced a "sense that all conflicts have ceased, that the opposing forces have canceled each other, that an epoch of striving

is over” (Labatt 160). In the financial language and logic used to frame the events of the novel, Faulkner thus avails himself of “finance” in the most etymological sense of the term: from the Old French *finer*, “to end, to settle a dispute” (“finance, n.1”).

*The Mansion*’s financial discourse, then, facilitates a sense of both narrative and affective closure. It provides an interpretive framework in which the novel can be read as a story of justice achieved, with all the emotionally palliative effects that achievement brings. I want to shift now to an examination of Faulkner’s public statements and nonfiction writing in the years leading up to *The Mansion*’s composition and 1959 publication in order to show that the novel’s financial discourse should be further understood as racially white—as embedding and promoting, that is, ideas and values that Faulkner mobilized for arguments about white racial superiority. Despite the critique of slavery and its racial legacies throughout his fiction, in the 1950s, Faulkner used his public addresses and nonfiction to articulate conservative ideas about African Americans and desegregation in the midst of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. Much of the thinking about race espoused in these essays, speeches, and public letters is echoed—or more to the point, plugged—by characters and scenes throughout *The Mansion*, and the financial language and logic used to justify Mink’s revenge and eventual narrative acquittal incorporates and exalts, in a less overtly racialized context, ideas and values that Faulkner used in his nonfiction to frame and apologize for racial inequality. *The Mansion*’s financial discourse, in other words, is not race-neutral. Reading the novel through the lens of Faulkner’s 1950s essays and speeches reveals how its language of debt and accountability serves as a veiled conduit for ideas and values central to Faulkner’s rearguard thinking about desegregation and the racial superiority of white

people. We have seen how *The Mansion*'s financial discourse encodes a drive toward narrative and affective closure and advances an understanding of justice premised on the elimination of all debts, justice as the absence of indebtedness. Faulkner's nonfiction writings further help to illuminate two other features of his financial thinking and rhetoric closely tied to those identified in the novel: a relentless insistence on the importance of self-enclosed individualism and a constant fixation on the future that draws attention away from the enduring legacies of the past.

Upon returning to Jefferson in 1938 after fighting fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War, the widowed Linda Snopes Kohl begins to lobby for changes to black schooling as part of her Communist radicalism. Barging into classrooms "without invitation or warning," she pushes for a "competitive weekly test" whose winners would spend the following week in an "academy she would establish, with white teachers" (*The Mansion* 246, 247, 247-248). Linda conducts these lobbying efforts in a bulldozing, oblivious fashion, for in addition to losing her husband in the war, she was also rendered near-deaf by a shell blast. "[S]he couldn't hear you see," notes Chick, "not just the words but the tones, over- and under-tones of alarm, fright, terror, in which the black voice would have to say Thank You" (248). Through such commentary, Faulkner shows a solicitous awareness of the real, life-threatening danger posed by the terroristic backlash of white Southerners to the postbellum sociopolitical advancement of African Americans. Unfortunately, this very awareness, voiced by Chick within the fiction, served for Faulkner, outside his fiction, as the basis for a rearguard argument against federally enforced desegregation.

Faulkner's notorious "go slow" position was premised on the not-incorrect idea that the South, as he put it in "Letter to a Northern Editor," published in *Life* magazine in 1956, "will go to any length [even and especially lethal violence] ... before it will accept alteration of its racial condition by mere force of law or economic threat" (*Essays* 89). The fact that the recalcitrance of Southern whites was morally wrong was less important to Faulkner than the practical threat of potential bloodshed posed by their emotional fever pitch, and this line of reasoning led him to a political stance for which he is now infamous:

I would say to all the organizations and groups which would force integration on the South by legal process: "Stop now for a moment. You have shown the Southerner what you can do and what you will do if necessary; give him a space in which to get his breath and assimilate that knowledge; to look about and see that (1) Nobody is going to force integration on him from the outside; (2) That he himself faces an obsolescence in his own land which only he can cure .... (*Essays* 91)

As a way of preparing readers for this call at the end of his "Letter," Faulkner prefaced it with an admonishing reference to "the rioting at the University of Alabama because of the admission as a student of Miss [Aurtherine] Lucy, a Negro" (*Essays* 88). Her life, he implied, and the lives of many African Americans like her, would become collateral damage if organizations and groups pushing for desegregation did not ease their political momentum. Indeed, less than a month after "Letter to a Northern Editor" was published, Faulkner defended his go-slow position against Northern detractors by noting that he was attempting "to save the South and the whole United States from the blot of Miss Aurtherine Lucy's death" (*Essays* 224). In a move marked not by insidious cunning so much as hapless short-sightedness, he justified his resistance to federally mandated

desegregation by framing it as a solicitous concern for the physical safety of African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Faulkner further buttressed this argument by observing that in the past, when he publicly “went on record as being opposed to compulsory racial inequality,” he had received many letters criticizing his outspoken position, and behold:

a few of these were from southern Negroes, ... saying in effect: “Please, Mr Faulkner, stop talking and be quiet. You are a good man and you think you are helping us. But you are not helping us. You are doing us harm. You are playing into the hands of the NAACP so that they are using you to make trouble for our race that we dont want. Please hush, you look after your white folks’ trouble and let us take care of ours.” (*Essays* 89-90)

The point here is not that no actually existing African Americans could possibly have held this position (i.e., that Faulkner was lying) but that, in his public commentary, he selectively cited only the few that did in order to make it seem, as much as possible, that his views were shared by African Americans. The same strategy informs the creation of black characters in his late-career fiction. Linda’s activism is finally brought to an end not by backlash from reactionary whites but by a request from the black principal of the school at which she is lobbying. Vetted by Faulkner as “a college-bred man ... of intelligence and devotion,” the principal meets with Gavin and asks him to call off Linda for the sake of the black community she thinks she is helping (247). The reasoning the principal offers is an unabashedly blunt fictional plug for the go-slow politics Faulkner espoused in his nonfiction:

“[W]e have got to make the white people need us first. In the old days, your people did need us, in your economy if not your culture, to make your cotton and tobacco and indigo. But that was the wrong need, bad and evil in itself. So it couldn’t last. It had to go. So now you dont need us. There is no place for us now

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<sup>2</sup> See Peavy for a comprehensive examination of Faulkner’s “go-slow” position and the various nonfiction statements throughout his career that comprised it.

in your culture or economy either. ... [W]e have got to make a place of our own in your culture and economy too. Not you to make a place for us ... but us to make a place for ourselves by compelling you to need us .... Will you tell her that? Say we thank her and we won't forget this. But to leave us alone. Let us have your friendship all the time, and your help when we need it. But keep your patronage until we ask for it." (*The Mansion* 248-249)

When Gavin suggests that not many black people are likely to agree with such thinking, the principal admits that "“None of them will, ... [j]ust as none of them agreed when Mr Washington said it”" (248). Faulkner thus willingly concedes that his school principal may be a minority in his own racial community. But just as he selectively cited the few black letter writers whose views reinforced his go-slow position, he strategically fills one of the only speaking roles for a black character in *The Mansion* with a figure who supports his own political views by selectively citing, in turn, the African-American political leader whose slower and quieter paradigm of self-reliance through patiently enduring hard work Faulkner himself found most palatable.

As the example of Linda's activism and its culmination in the encounter between Gavin and the school principal suggests, the racialized subject matter that Faulkner incorporated into *The Mansion* is intimately tied to the statements about race he was making in public addresses and nonfiction writing at the time. In the broadest and most straightforward sense, the whiteness of *The Mansion* could be said to inhere in the representational tropes and the lines of reasoning it contains that cite or abet the racially conservative, go-slow stance of its author. Whiteness, in this sense, is most evident in moments where Faulkner employs black characters and narrative plots that directly touch upon the politics of racial uplift. But as with the other chapters of this project, I aim to show that racial identities and ideas are at stake throughout Faulkner's texts in moments



that do not necessarily involve characters of color or explicitly racial language. As Theresa Towner argues in her study of his late fiction, “Faulkner did not need specific racial issues in order to racialize his subject matter” (11). Any given fiction “might not be ‘about’ race, but it is nearly always about ‘race’” insofar as the histories of racial oppression and the processes of racial formation are ubiquitously dispersed throughout social life (Towner 11). Although the whiteness of *The Mansion* could be traced to the way Faulkner uses Linda’s racial activism as an occasion to plug his own go-slow ideology, the tangential episode of Gavin’s encounter with the black school principal does not capture the extent to which whiteness *permeates* the text. Beyond the single, interracial encounter showcasing Faulkner’s go-slow position, it is the entire discourse of debt surrounding the presentation of Faulkner’s characters—wherein justice is equated with debt elimination and individual self-worth is premised on being debt-free—that constitutes the novel’s participation in a white-supremacist moral and cultural paradigm. Examining how debt rhetoric itself enters into Faulkner’s public addresses and nonfiction enables us to see this.

Faulkner’s resistance to federally mandated desegregation was part of a larger anxiety about the mid-century deterioration of American character and values. The state apparatus, in his view, had become hypertrophied and coddling in the decades since the New Deal. In his 1952 “Address to the Delta Council,” Faulkner gave a lecture to a regional development organization in Mississippi on what he saw as the nation’s escalating betrayal of its own founding principles. Invoking the Declaration of Independence, he warned that Americans might have forgotten what the founding fathers meant: “‘Life and liberty in which to *pursue* happiness,’” not “just to chase happiness,

but to *work* for it” (*Essays* 127, emphases added). Subtending all of the other rights upon which America was founded, he argued, was “the inalienable right to responsibility,” a point he could not emphasize enough (128).

That’s what I am talking about: responsibility. ... [T]he necessity of man to be responsible if he wishes to remain free; ... the duty of a man, the individual, each individual, every individual, to be responsible for the consequences of his own acts, *to pay his own score, owing nothing to any man*. (*Essays* 129, emphasis added)

Freedom, in this formulation, is an exacting, ideal condition that one approximates by being as self-made as possible, as minimally indebted to the state or society for sustenance as one can be: “owing nothing” to anyone other than one’s resilient, hard-working self. This logic helps to account for why the stoic, determined Mink, despite his criminal record, is set “free” by Faulkner at the end of *The Mansion*, and it also accounts for the repeated attacks on the welfare state that crop up later in Faulkner’s Delta Council address:

somewhere, at some moment, something had happened ... to all the descendants of the old tough, durable, uncompromising men, so that now, in 1952, when we talk of security, we don’t even mean for the rest of our own lives, let alone that of our and our wife’s children, but only for so long as we ourselves can hold our individual place on a public relief role or at a bureaucratic or political or any other organization’s gravy-trough. (130)

Coddled into the indignity of *dependence* and left incapable of (patriarchal) responsibility for the subsistence of their families, American men, Faulkner contended, have “swap[ped]” the right “to independence and freedom in which to work and endure in [their] own sweat” for “the right not to earn, but to be given” (131). In the process, he observed, America has “made respectable and even elevated to a national system, that which the old tough fathers would have scorned and condemned: charity” (131).

It may not be much of an exaggeration to say that in making such claims, Faulkner was among America's first neoliberal intellectuals, and indeed, like the neoliberal ideologues whose claims about welfare dependency would rise to prominence later in the century, Faulkner, too, coded the characteristics of self-reliance, industriousness, and responsibility he deemed morally superior as racially white. In another public essay entitled "A Letter to the Leaders of the Negro Race" (1956), Faulkner reiterated his go-slow position by imploring African-American leaders to follow "a course of inflexible and unviolent flexibility" in the pursuit of civil rights (*Essays* 109). "[I]f I were a Negro," he posited in an audacious counterfactual, "I would say to my people: ... 'The white man has devoted three hundred years to teaching us to be patient; that is one thing at least in which we are his superiors. Let us turn it into a weapon against him'" (*Essays* 111). In his earlier "Letter to a Northern Editor," the alleged reason for such patience was the pragmatic interest of avoiding lethal backlash from Southern whites. But however much Faulkner framed his resistance to enforced desegregation as a concern for the safety of African Americans, this was hardly his only justification, for in his "Letter to the Leaders of the Negro Race," he goes much further by suggesting that African Americans should also go slow because they are *not yet prepared* for freedom's responsibilities. Continuing his crude "If I were a Negro" conceit, while simultaneously reprising the language of his 1952 Delta Council address, he adds that

above all, I would say this to the leaders of our race: "We must learn to deserve equality so that we can hold and keep it after we get it. ... We must learn that our inalienable right ... to freedom and liberty and the pursuit of happiness, means exactly what our founding fathers meant by it: the right to *opportunity* to be free and equal, provided one is worthy of it, will work to gain it and then work to keep it." (*Essays* 112, original emphasis)

Learning to deserve equality implies, in this logic, a capacity to assume the obligations attached to it, which, in addition to “the responsibilities of physical cleanliness and of moral rectitude, of a conscience capable of choosing between right and wrong,” include, above all, “the pride of independence of charity or relief” (*Essays* 112). “The white man has not taught us that,” writes Faulkner in blackface, “He taught us only patience and courtesy. ... So we must teach ourselves that” (*Essays* 112). In the essay’s closing lines, he sugarcoats the interminably patient endurance and humility he asks of African Americans by framing it in terms of a lofty, dignified aesthetic category: “Our tragedy is that these virtues of responsibility are the white man’s virtues of which he boasts, yet we, the Negro, must be his superior in them” (*Essays* 112).

In noting that whites often “boast” of such virtues but do not consistently practice them (as the term “boast” implies), Faulkner seems to acknowledge that asking African Americans to learn and exhibit such virtues as a precondition for sociopolitical advancement is hypocritical to no small degree. This logical hiccup, however, does not stop him from insisting that those virtues *are nonetheless white* and that, in consequence, the more African Americans “learn to deserve equality,” the whiter—symbolically, in terms of character—they will become. Nowhere is this more evident than in a 1958 address he delivered to a group of honor societies at the University of Virginia. Stating forthrightly what was already implied in his earlier claim that the Negro must learn to deserve the opportunity to be free and equal, Faulkner opened this address with a barely qualified gambit: “For the sake of argument, let us agree that as yet the Negro is incapable of equality” because he is “not yet capable of, or refuses to accept, the responsibilities” attached to it (*Essays* 156, 157). Relying on a sweeping image of

African Americans as demoralized by slavery and Jim Crow to the point of being robbed by these institutions of the inclination and capacity for self-responsibility,<sup>3</sup> Faulkner opts for full-on paternalism, claiming that “the white man, must take [the Negro] in hand and teach him [the] responsibility” he lacks—teach him, that is, “self-restraint, honesty, ... to act not even as well as just any white man, but *to act as well as the best of white men*” (*Essays* 157, 158, emphasis added). The education of the Negro works toward a teleology of whiteness. In formulating this point, Faulkner manages yet again to tiptoe around the hypocrisy that mars his position without actually confronting it, for in learning “to cease forever more thinking like a Negro and acting like a Negro,” the African American will be up against what even Faulkner admits is a double standard (*Essays* 157).

[B]ecause of his race and color, it will not suffice for him to think and act like just any white man: he must think and act like the best of white men. Because where the white man, because of his race and color, can practise morality and rectitude just on Sunday and let the rest of the week go hang, the Negro can never let up nor deviate. (*Essays* 157)

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<sup>3</sup> It is unsurprising yet worth noting that nowhere in his nonfiction does Faulkner provide evidence of actually existing African Americans behaving with the irresponsible idleness and profligacy he imputes to them. Indeed, one would have to look to Faulkner’s fiction for any examples of the incapable Negro he ostensibly has in mind. One set of exemplary figures would be the black characters who serve as comic tricksters, prone to a leisurely blitheness occasionally broken by bouts of cunning activity when such activity offers a shortcut to something they want (e.g., Simon Strother in *Flags in the Dust* or George Wilkins in *Go Down, Moses*). A different kind of example would be Fonsiba Beauchamp and her husband in *Go Down, Moses*, who, in an act of negligence that Faulkner portrays with Gothic horror, are content to live on a decrepit, uncultivated farm, disinclined to develop and maintain their home because it is enough that they are, as Fonsiba says with an eerily blank stare, “free” (*Go Down, Moses* 267). Even these fictional portraits of irresponsible Negroes are undermined in their ability to support Faulkner’s nonfiction claims by the presence of other black characters throughout his fiction (typically older women) who serve as sentimentalized paragons of humility, industriousness, and patient endurance—virtues of responsibility that Faulkner claims, in his nonfiction, the Negro has yet to learn. Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury* would be one example here; Molly Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses* would be another, to say nothing of Faulkner’s real-life caretaker Caroline Barr on whom the latter was based and whom Faulkner himself eulogized as a shining example of resilience, asceticism, and hard work [*Essays* 117-118]). Considered through the lens of his nonfiction, this latter group of virtuous old women reads as a set of exceptions that prove the rule or as sentimentalized visions of what, for Faulkner, the Negro should aspire to be. Faulkner, in other words, provides no evidence of Negro profligacy in *nonfictional* contexts, and even the examples found in his fiction are at cross purposes.

Faulkner does not decry this unfairness so much as shrug dismayed shoulders at it, chalking it up as par for the course. In the meantime, he safeguards the whiteness of his virtues of responsibility by stipulating that whiteness is emblemized not by “just any” white people—most of whom are liable, when they are anywhere other than church, to let it all “hang” out—but only by “the best” of them, invoking a dodgy, exceptionalist logic in which whites are not held accountable for any members of their race with whom they would prefer not to be identified, whereas blacks are held accountable to white stereotypes that even Faulkner admits have no basis in reality (“the white man,” he notes, “has *forced* the Negro to be always a Negro rather than a human being” [*Essays* 157, emphasis added]).

In “Letter to the Leaders of the Negro Race”—speaking as if he were a Negro to a black audience—Faulkner deigned to admit that white hypocrisy was the source of African Americans’ tragedy: the latter had to stomach the indignity of proving they have attained virtues about which white people boast but hardly practice. In the 1958 address, however—speaking as a white man to a white audience—Faulkner changes his tune and re-signifies the very term he had used with respect to the Negro earlier: “His tragedy may be that so far he is competent for equality only in the ratio of his white blood” (*Essays* 156). What used to be the tragedy of white hypocrisy has been revamped as a tragedy of black incompetence, yet those who have no white blood can still learn to cease thinking and acting “like a Negro” (the address implies) through the saving grace of white education. Hence, when Faulkner charges whites with teaching the Negro responsibility, he specifies that this might be done “either by taking him into our white schools, or giving him white teachers in his own schools until we have taught the teachers of his own

race to teach and train him in these hard and unpleasant habits” (*Essays* 158). When Linda Kohl lobbies, in *The Mansion*, to put “properly-educated white teachers in the Negro school” and send the displaced black ones “North to white schools where they will be accepted and trained as white teachers are,” Faulkner is not criticizing her top-down racial paternalism but rather the *pace* at which she works: she is on the right rack; she just needs to go slower (*The Mansion* 250). Likewise, when the school’s principal asks Gavin to call her off so that African Americans can work their own way, up from slavery, to an indispensable position in the South’s culture and economy, that black character’s favorable representation in the text is based on a conviction that associates him, in Faulkner’s mind, with “the best of white men”: the conviction that, in securing their prosperity, people must pay their own score, emancipated black people included.

Faulkner’s nonfiction insinuates a clear link, then, between whiteness, on the one hand, and the distinction of “owing nothing to any man,” on the other. If independence of charity or relief is a key virtue of responsibility, and if African Americans, in Faulkner’s account, lack those virtues, then white people necessarily become the exemplars of “the duty of a man ... to pay his own score,” and internalizing that duty is what it means for Faulkner’s Negro to deserve equality by learning to “think and act like the best of white men.” All of this financial language, all this rhetoric of debt and accountability forever geared toward encouraging the avoidance and elimination of indebtedness, is linked, moreover, to the constant enshrinement of self-enclosed individualism as a universal ideal: “the duty of a man, the individual, each individual, every individual, ... to pay his own score.” As Faulkner bluntly put it in an interview while abroad in Japan, “I think the salvation of man is in his individuality”: “the individual can be tough enough to protect

himself. ... It may be a little easier to belong to a group, but I don't think he has any business belonging to any group" (*Faulkner at Nagano* 195).<sup>4</sup> Insofar as Faulkner racially coded the "pride of independence of charity or relief" that would distinguish such "tough," self-reliant individuals, the social and moral outlook expressed across his nonfiction as a whole suggests that "the salvation of man" is really his approximation of whiteness.

This racialized constellation of ideas accounts not only for why Faulkner would choose a tenant farmer as the arguable protagonist of *The Mansion* but also for why that tenant farmer had to be white. Few historical figures would allow Faulkner to showcase the virtues of self-restraint and the resolution to exercise one's right to an "independence and freedom in which to work and endure in [one's] own sweat" better than the tenant farmers and sharecroppers who persevered under an economic system that obliged them to perpetual labor in order to pay off perpetual debt.<sup>5</sup> While it might seem strange to embody and endorse a moral framework built around the importance of "owing nothing to any man" through a figure whose life is constantly structured by what he owes to a landowner, in fictionalizing the tenant farmer through Mink, Faulkner was careful to make the measure of a man not the sheer fact of his material debt but the way he handles his debt-ridden condition (the former judgment would amount, after all, to blaming the

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion of Faulkner's distrust of group-based social and political action, see Towner 126-128.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief overview of the history and the legal, economic, and demographic parameters of tenant farming and sharecropping in the American South, see Ransom and Sutch, Mandle, Bolton, Ochiltree, and Douglas-Bowers. Tenant farming and sharecropping are similar but not identical conditions. "A tenant farmer typically paid a landowner for the right to grow crops on a certain piece of property" and "in addition to having some cash to pay rent, also generally owned some livestock and tools"; "[s]harecroppers, on the other hand, were even more impoverished than tenant farmers" and often had no resources or cash of their own (Bolton). Faulkner is never explicit about naming Mink as one or the other, but I describe him as tenant farmer rather than a sharecropper because he does not appear to be entirely destitute and, indeed, in line with the aforementioned distinctions, owns his own (albeit malnourished) milk cow.



individual simply for being poor and discount the reality of the economic and legal system that compels him to take on debt to survive). When Mink's milk cow wanders onto his rich neighbor Houston's property, he gives into the temptation of letting her winter there and then collecting her afterward by acting as though he did not realize she was gone. This desperate plan backfires when Houston points out that the fattened and now pregnant cow has drastically appreciated in value and appeals to the law to make Mink work off the price difference before the cow is returned. Despite the risk of physical exhaustion and of shortchanging labor on the crops at home that he will need to pay his rent, Mink insists upon laboring day and night for 37 days until "the judgment was worked out to the last penny," refusing, in the process, his landlord Will Varner's (self-serving) advice to pay the fee by adding it to his furnish bill for next year so he can get back to work on his own fields (*The Mansion* 25). Likewise, while on his way to Memphis to purchase a gun to kill Flem after being released from prison, Mink notes that one of the men who provides him with work, food, and accommodations has a pistol that he often leaves unattended, but Mink refuses to take it: "*No. I aint never stole. I aint never come to that and I wont never*" (302, original emphasis).

Faulkner's fictional treatment of the tenant farmer, in other words, uses the material fact of his impoverishment as a backdrop against which the virtues of self-restraint and the pride of independence of charity or relief (or theft) can better shine through. Whatever material and moral debts Mink does accrue, whether by property infringements or murder, he insists on paying them in full via labor or prison time, refusing the charity of being let off the hook, and whenever it is in his power to do so, he avoids indebtedness all together by recourse to individual determination and hard work. It

is in this sense that Mink can think of himself, in terms that echo Faulkner's nonfiction almost verbatim, as not a rich man but at least "an independent one, asking no favors of any man, paying his own way" (*Mansion* 9). That the tenant farmer through whom Faulkner embodied these virtues is white cannot be understood as a mere coincidence. Historically, the majority of the South's tenant farmers and sharecroppers were black, and whatever economic adversities poor white farmers did face, black farmers faced the same trials with the added pressure of racial prejudice and legal disenfranchisements (Douglas-Bowers; Bolton; Doyle 313-315). Faulkner was no doubt aware of this, and while too big a claim should not be made on a small point, his decision, in the face of historical fact, to make the novel's doggedly resilient tenant farmer white conveniently racializes the virtues of responsibility in a way that shores up the contentions of his nonfiction.

As far as those contentions go, Faulkner's idealization of debt-free individualism is very forthright, but there is a final, distinguishing feature of his nonfiction racial commentary that is perhaps less premeditated but equally consequential: a disinclination to speak about the past that manifests as a constant *inclination* to frame the virtues of responsibility as virtues necessary for America to move *forward*. Faulkner's debt-phobic, individualistic, white-supremacist thinking about race and American national character accommodates a tendency to avoid discussing the enduring legacies of past racial strife by emphasizing the importance of racial harmony as the precondition of an all-important national future.

To a considerable degree, this temporal orientation of Faulkner's racial discourse stems from the historical context in which his nonfiction was produced. Cold War concerns about the spread of totalitarian communism in the wake of 1950s decolonization

led him to emphasize that the ability of the United States to sway formerly colonized nations to the path of capitalist democracy depended on the ability of Americans to surmount the racial prejudices that undercut their nation's reputed devotion to freedom and equality. In a 1956 essay published in *Harper's Magazine*, Faulkner observed that many countries, in "the Far and Middle East" and in "North Africa" among others, "were not communist" or "communist-inclined" even "where it seemed to [him] they should have been" (*Essays* 101). Upon wondering why, he reasoned, in a complacent gesture of American exceptionalism, that "[i]t's because of America. These people still believe in the American dream .... They believe in us and are willing to trust and follow us not because of our material power: Russia has that: but because of the idea of individual human freedom and liberty and equality on which our nation was founded" (*Essays* 101-102). American racial prejudice, however, jeopardized this anti-communist belief by revealing, as Faulkner put it, "that when we talk of freedom and liberty, we not only mean neither, we don't even mean security and justice and even the preservation of life for people whose pigmentation is not the same as ours" (*Essays* 223). Faulkner's Cold War plea to fellow Americans thus took the form of an incitement to colorblindness: "if we who are still free want to continue so, all of us who are still free had better confederate and confederate fast with all others who still have a choice to be free—confederate not as black people nor white people nor blue or pink or green people, but as people who are still free, with all other people who are still free" (*Essays* 102).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It should be made clear that Faulkner's emphasis on the Cold War stakes of achieving racial equality in America stood in *unresolved tension* with his claims about the need for African Americans to "go slow" in pursuing civil rights because of their unpreparedness for freedom's responsibilities. In the 1956 *Harper's* piece, where the time-sensitive need for all free people to confederate against totalitarian communism is explicitly on his mind, Faulkner identified the fear and insecurity of white Americans as the principle obstacle at hand.

Situating Faulkner's nonfiction in its proper Cold War context is crucial to historicizing his claims, and it accounts for much of the fixation on the future that pervades his thinking about race. However, I want to emphasize that this orientation toward the future is not a feature of Faulkner's racial thinking *only* where concerns about the specter of totalitarian communism are present. Rather, it is the normative, default temporal orientation of all the racial discourse in *The Mansion* and his 1950s nonfiction. Simply recalling the many passages examined here confirms this. That "the white man ... can practise morality and rectitude just on Sunday ..., [while] the Negro can never let up nor deviate" is a call for future-facing resolve. That the white Southerner "faces an obsolescence in his own land which only he can cure" is a prophecy and a prognosis. Even *The Mansion*'s black school principal is concerned not with what was but with what is and what must become: "There is no place for us now in your culture or economy

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The white man knows that only ninety years ago not one percent of the Negro race could own a deed to land, let alone read that deed; yet in only ninety years, although his only contact with a county courthouse is the window through which he pays the taxes for which he has no representation, he can own his land and farm it with inferior stock and worn-out tools and gear—equipment which any white man would starve with—and raise children and feed and clothe them and send them to what schools are available ... and end his life holding his head up because he owes no man .... That's what the white man in the South is afraid of: that the Negro, who has done so much with no chance, might do so much more with an equal one that he might take the white man's economy away from him" (*Essays* 96).

"We must be free not because we claim freedom, but because we practise it," Faulkner concluded (*Essays* 106). But to "practise" freedom, as we know, means, for Faulkner, accepting the responsibilities of hard work and self-reliance attached to it. As if to sharpen his claim in the *Harper's* piece that the racial hang-ups of white Americans are the problem, Faulkner even characterized African Americans as being *more* adept at these responsibilities than whites, what with the "Bunches and Washingtons and Carvers," for years now, "teaching him—the Negro—by precept and example what a lot of our white people have not learned yet: that to gain equality, one must deserve it" (*Essays* 104, 105). From this single essay alone (titled "On Fear," in reference to the white racial neuroses it critiques), one might get the mistaken impression that Faulkner's view of African Americans was one of unqualified admiration, but placing it alongside his other writings throughout the decade clarifies that his statements about race are contradictory and opportunistic. In discussing the domestic issue of federally enforced desegregation, he maintained that African Americans were not yet ready for freedom's responsibilities, but in discussing the international issue of looming totalitarian communism, he pinpointed the reactionary economic fears of Southern whites as the most pressing issue, a tedious recalcitrance the free world cannot afford. As Theresa Towner has rightly observed, Faulkner's late-career racial views are best described as irreducibly "conflicted" (121).

either. ... [W]e have got to make a place of our own in your culture and economy too.”

Informing each of these utterances is a disinclination to think about the past that permeates Faulkner’s 1950s statements about race (this despite the fact that when taken as a whole, his literary oeuvre is marked by a constant concern with the historical legacy of slavery in the South). It is striking that Faulkner’s future-oriented statements about race sit comfortably alongside a vocabulary and rhetoric of debt and accountability, which usually connote attention to how the unresolved past impinges on the present. Indeed, in a gesture that begins to move us toward the discussion about contemporary reparations in this chapter’s next section, we might ask how it is possible for Faulkner to talk about the importance of paying one’s dues and owing nothing to any man without considering, historically, what white people might owe to black people (to say nothing of Native Americans) and whether whites have really worked to “deserve” the opportunities and privileges they enjoy.

Faulkner’s silence on this matter cannot be attributed to the notion that ideas and calls for black reparations did not exist during his lifetime. As Charles P. Henry has explained, though they may not have gone by the name of “reparations,” demands for material compensation to black Americans for slavery—as well as concrete proposals for how this might be arranged—were around (though not necessarily successful) since at least the Civil War and Reconstruction, whether in the form of policies for redistributing confiscated Confederate lands to freedmen or lobbying Congress to institute ex-slave pensions (9-57). The absence of any consideration of the possibility and rightfulness of reparations in Faulkner’s thinking is not due to the concept being historically unavailable to him but to the consummately individualistic, anti-statist nature of his moral values and

political views. Faulkner's distrust of group-based social and political action, along with his aversion to individuals relying on the state (those formerly tough, independent American men being emasculated by the "public relief role" or "any other organization's gravy-trough") would have made the idea of federally instituted payments to black Americans doubly inconceivable to him and anathema if he ever considered them at all. To the man who prized above all "independence of charity or relief," such payments would presumably have registered as in fact robbing black Americans of the opportunity to develop the virtues of responsibility they supposedly lacked, reproducing the effects of slavery rather than alleviating them. The habitual future-oriented-ness of Faulkner's racial thinking is a symptom of the motivations that led him to invoke a rhetoric of debt and accountability in discussions of race in the first place. It reveals the extent to which his debt (or rather anti-debt) rhetoric is designed to structure a conversation about race in way that has, as its foremost goal, *not* the project of assessing and paying for debts incurred by past and ongoing racial oppression but rather the promotion of an ethos of proudly industrious, resolutely independent, self-enclosed individualism as a universal norm and sine qua non of American character. Though not necessarily a premeditated outcome, Faulkner effectively consigns the topic of uncompensated racial violence to a silenced and compartmentalized past by premising the achievement of racial equality on the future-facing insistence that each individual must "make the effort ... to seek not for a mere crutch to lean on, but to stand erect on his own feet by believing ... in his own toughness and endurance" (*Faulkner at Nagano* 186).

This fundamental disinterest—indeed, disbelief—in the idea that the legacies of racial oppression in the past warrant group-based, institutionally-backed compensation in

the present starkly *differentiates* Faulkner's racial thinking from the discourses of white debt and reparations in our contemporary moment. But as I will argue shortly, contemporary ideas and practices of reparations are still beset by some of the pernicious, white-supremacy-consolidating limitations characterizing Faulkner's racial discourse, making a thorough understanding of those limitations crucial to our ability to learn from his ostensibly anti-racist thinking in the present. Faulkner's financial language of debt and accountability connotes less a desire to reckon with history than a desire to move past it—or at best, a desire to reckon with history on the condition that reckoning with it entails putting it behind us. While this is never said in so many words, it is palpable in the diction and verbal tense of his nonfiction pronouncements, and this racially fraught emphasis on futurity—on letting go of the past— is nowhere more vividly and alluringly enshrined than in a brief, utopian daydream Mink has about himself and Flem toward the beginning of *The Mansion* (a dream whose all-white cast can make its wistful yearning for a historically amnesiac, future harmony seem racially irrelevant). While Mink sits in prison contemplating his revenge early in the novel, Faulkner clarifies to readers that Mink's grudge toward Flem is qualified, paradoxical as it may seem, by a fervent distaste for holding grudges:

he even said aloud: "What a shame we cant both of us jest come out two old men setting peaceful in the sun or the shade, waiting to die together, not even thinking no more about hurt or harm or getting even, not even remembering no more about hurt or harm or anguish or revenge,"—two old men not only incapable of further harm to anybody but even *incapable of remembering hurt or harm*, as if whatever necessary amount of the money which Flem no longer needed ... could be used to blot, efface, obliterate those forty years which he, Mink, no longer needed now and soon ... would not even miss. (*The Mansion* 104-105, emphasis added)

Flem's record of inexcusable moral crimes renders this endgame impossible, of course, and in closing the novel with Mink's revenge, Faulkner unequivocally affirms his commitment to debt accountability and the financially figured justice it entails. In an ideal world, however, Mink and Flem's conflict would be resolved in a way that precipitates reconciliation and forgiveness, and it would be easy to dismiss this as a superfluous counterfactual if the actual ending of *The Mansion* did not in fact fulfill this wish in part. Faulkner's insistence on debt accountability forbids him from letting Flem off the hook, but once Flem is dealt with, the forbearing spirit of Mink's vision is honored at the end of the novel when, as we have seen, Faulkner uses the rhetoric of freedom and the image of a beleaguered Mink laying down to rest to coax readers into being "incapable of remembering hurt or harm" and thus forgiving Mink for his murderous record. Ultimately, as Labatt argues, "Faulkner encourages a total relaxation of tensions, *a belief that the past is past*" (160, emphasis added). Beneath the drive toward unforgiving retribution that impels his plot runs a contrary longing for ungrudging conviviality that flickers in Mink's peaceful vision of himself and Flem as two old men and ultimately triumphs in "the total relaxation of tensions" that closes the novel. However austere *The Mansion's* unsparing commitment to debt accountability might seem, Faulkner tempers it by always keeping in mind the light at the end of the accountability tunnel: the payoff of an inviolate individualism un-haunted by the weight of the past for which *The Mansion's* consummately self-reliant, debt-ridden yet accountability-obsessed, murderous yet heaven-bound tenant farmer is the unassuming white poster child.



## II

Faulkner's financial discourse of debt and accountability represents debt as something that exists only to be avoided or gotten rid of, a disposition highly amenable to conceptions of justice geared toward the normalization of self-enclosed individualism and closing off a chapter in history—toward making the past past. The narrative arc of *The Mansion* urges readers to view forgiveness, in the sense of total absolution from lingering grudges and obligations, as the proper affective response toward moral and material debtors who have since paid their dues. Playing out in a story with an almost entirely white cast of characters, these principles of debt accountability and future-oriented conflict resolution might seem devoid of racial significance, but we know from Faulkner's nonfiction that they can facilitate discourses that conceptualize racial progress in ways that perpetuate white supremacy and render inconceivable any form of progress relying on group-based, state-backed initiatives rather than a universal commitment to individual patience and hard work.

In epitomizing a particular kind of financial thinking wherein the language of debt and accountability tends toward a sense of historical closure and the fetishization of unencumbered individualism, *The Mansion* and Faulkner's 1950s nonfiction serve as instructive object lessons for contemporary white anti-racist thinking and practice, for the same tendencies permeate the efforts of white people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to atone for national histories of racial oppression as well as the way these efforts have been framed in governmental and popular discourses. We can discern these patterns by examining how the term "white debt" is invoked in U.S. media and by looking at contemporary scholarship on reparations to African Americans for slavery and Jim Crow and to

indigenous nations for colonial dispossession and genocide. Faulkner's nonfiction claims about black irresponsibility might represent a brand of overt racism whose prevalence has declined in past decades, but his fixation on a racially harmonious future and his preoccupation with debtless, unencumbered individualism are mirrored throughout the contemporary, liberal, politically correct meditations on race characteristic of the post-Civil Rights Era, undermining the capacity for discourses of reparations and white debt to dismantle white supremacy. It is easy to fault Faulkner for being blatantly racist by the standards of historical hindsight, but if we are to read him as critics committed to the improvement of contemporary white anti-racism, that purpose is best served not by scapegoating his conservative racial views but by questioning the extent to which the vocabularies and practices of white anti-racism today really are free from the rhetorical and affective inclinations that kept his critique of racial inequality mired in white supremacy.

Arguments for reparations to African Americans stand as one of the clearest examples of how the language of debt remains central to contemporary racial politics in America. As a nation built upon centuries of slavery and decades of racist housing, educational, and financial policies during and after Jim Crow, the United States has thrived by violently extracting or withholding from black communities labor, wealth, and opportunities that the government has never sought to return in any substantial way. As Ta-Nehisi Coates has put it in "The Case for Reparations," "It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear." Coates' "we" is a curious formulation, and if he does not name white Americans specifically, this is because he seeks to emphasize that black

reparations are a problem and an opportunity for the nation as a whole (“An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens,” he writes, “is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring ... the sins of the past ...”). Nevertheless, Coates’ proverbial credit-card bill represents a moral and material debt accrued, first and foremost, by white people. When he glosses reparations as “the full acceptance of our collective biography” or “the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely,” it is white people’s willingness or refusal to acknowledge the nation’s history of violence and their own complicity in it that are at stake. In the United States, legal claims and institutional arrangements for black reparations have a long history with a record of occasional if limited success.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, however, it remains the case that the U.S. federal government has never issued a formal apology to African Americans as a group for slavery and Jim Crow nor established any system of material compensation for these injustices. But while black reparations have yet to occur on a national scale, there has been a rich body of scholarship debating the moral paradigms and institutional forms they *should* adopt. These debates clearly illustrate the contemporary stakes of the ideas and

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<sup>7</sup> The history of precedents for black reparations includes initiatives during Reconstruction to allocate confiscated Confederate lands to freedmen; petitions to the government for ex-slave pensions; the persistent efforts of House Representative John Conyers Jr. to introduce a bill calling for a congressional study of slavery’s lingering effects and possible forms of reparation (although Conyers later resigned due to sexual harassment allegations and has since passed away); the 1994 Rosewood Compensation Act passed by the Florida legislature to address the destruction of black property in the Rosewood race riot of 1923; the organizational efforts of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA) as well as the Nation of Islam; legislation in the state of California requiring the assessment of insurance companies for records of slaveholder insurance and the determination of whether and how compensation can be made to slave descendants if so; and a variety of legal cases filed by black individuals against private corporations and state and federal governmental bodies, some successful, others not (Henry 9-99; Brooks 6-19, 119-138; Coates). In cases where material compensation has been made, it has often gone unaccompanied by any formal apology that would signal acknowledge of guilt and clarify the historical record. Likewise, there have been a few apologies made by U.S. government officials without any accompanying material compensation, such as President Bill Clinton’s apology for the syphilis tests on black men in Tuskegee, Alabama, or the 2005 apology by U.S. lawmakers to victims and survivors of lynching and their descendants (Henry 94).

structures of feeling identified in Faulkner's work, for one of their biggest points of contention concerns precisely the matter of closure and forgiveness so central to *The Mansion*. This debate is encapsulated by the contrasting models of reparation offered by two scholars: the forward-looking "atonement and forgiveness" model of Roy L. Brooks and the backward-looking "rights-based" approach of J. Angelo Corlett.

"Racial reconciliation," Brooks argues, "should be the primary purpose of slave redress," for this gives reparations a "forward-looking quality" that enables a "more racially harmonious" future (141). Formal apologies are crucial here, for they signify an "acknowledgement of guilt" on behalf of the descendants of slavery's perpetrators and "set the historical record straight" regarding "the magnitude of the injustice, including its lingering effects" (144, 148). Brooks' goal of racial harmony renders him wary of reparations models marked by a "preoccupation with compensation and punishment," but this is not to say that he discounts the importance of material compensation for past wrongs. Reparations payments are essential "because they make apologies believable" (142). They turn mere rhetoric into a "material reality" by practically embodying the perpetrator group's commitment "to change its behavior" (142, 144). (For the compensation part of his model, Brooks proposes an atonement trust fund and a slavery museum [157-163]). Once an adequate apology and compensation have been made, they should be met, Brooks contends, with black forgiveness, which he regards—in a rather equivocal distinction—not as a "moral imperative" but as "an *unconditional civic obligation*" (168, original emphasis). That is, provided that "the federal government's apology and reparations are substantial," African Americans, for Brooks, have a "duty to

forgive” based not in some abstract notion of philosophical truth but in the pragmatic interest of black and white people living together in a single society (169, 168).

Contrast this model with that of J. Angelo Corlett, who proposes instead “a backward-looking” approach that views reparations as a “compensatory *right*” (25, 26, original emphasis). “While utilitarian considerations of reconciliation may play a secondary role,” the chief purpose of reparations, in Corlett’s view, is to honor “the rights of those groups that would suffer at the hands of harmful wrongdoers” (25, 23). These are first and foremost “rights to *compensation*,” and to acknowledge such compensation *as a right* is to acknowledge that the moral claims and interests of the wronged group are valid and reasonable (26, original emphasis). As in Brooks’ model, the purpose of reparations, for Corlett, is “the acknowledgment of a past wrong” and the “repayment of a debt” (23). They thus entail “unambiguous apology to the wronged parties (or their successors)” and appropriately scaled material compensation (25). Unlike Brooks’ forward-looking, reconciliation-based model, however, forgiveness, in Corlett’s rights-based approach, is supererogatory:

Reparations ought not to presuppose anything like reconciliation or social integration .... [I]t is presumptuous to think that the offspring of oppressed groups ought morally to desire to live with the offspring of oppressors. Should Indians and blacks [Corlett’s book argues for reparations to both] want to reconcile and remain integrated with the rest of the ethnic groups in the United States, so be it, and they ought to be treated with the dignity and respect they so richly deserve .... But only an unthinking ideology of forgiveness would entail that there is a moral duty of Indians and blacks to “forgive and forget” the evils perpetrated against their forebears by the U.S. government, certain U.S.-based business [*sic*] and institutions, and the U.S. citizenry. (Corlett 190)

Corlett specifically singles out Brooks in making this point, charging him with a “utilitarianism” that shortchanges “black compensatory rights” in exchange for

“considerations of social utility maximization”—i.e., the duty to forgive whites in the name of the civic interest (233).

To be fair, Brooks contends that forgiveness would entail “the cessation of resentment,” not that “the victim is supposed to forget about the atrocity,” so the charge that a reconciliation-based approach would entail black people to forgive and forget is misguided (169, 165). Indeed, while Corlett’s critiques of Brooks are often convincing, some are highly debatable and even rest on blatant mischaracterizations of the latter’s thought.<sup>8</sup> That being said, I argue nonetheless that Corlett’s backward-looking model should be endorsed over that of Brooks and that justification for this claim rests on the inauspicious precedents set by ineffective and even counterproductive forward-looking apologies and reparations that have *already* been made, outside the U.S., to groups other than African Americans. Recent national apologies and gestures of reparation for past atrocities of colonialism demonstrate the dangers of forward-looking, reconciliation-based models of redress.

Chiara De Cesari, for instance, has examined the rhetoric and media coverage of Italy’s 2008 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation with Libya, intended as a

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<sup>8</sup> As Corlett persuasively notes, a reconciliation model overlooks the extent to which many black Americans might not view the U.S. government as their own, and he fairly questions the justification for Brooks’ stipulation that reparations trust fund money must be spent specifically on black education, asking why black people should not be “entitled by right” to do with their money as they please (232). Corlett also suggests, however, that for Brooks, “apology requires no compensation,” which is patently untrue (231). He also argues that Brooks’ proposed trust fund would fail to “compensate blacks to the extent of their suffering” but does not support this claim with any figures or calculations justifying the charge (233). Most alarmingly, he pushes his critique of Brooks’ reconciliation model to an aggressive, lefter-than-thou extent verging on ad hominem attacks: “Brooks’s approach to ‘justice’ for blacks is essentially one that mirrors the attitude of the ‘house negro’ who is so concerned about his white master that he would do anything reasonable to protect those interests—even sacrifice greatly his own remedial rights and those of other blacks” (Corlett 235). (Corlett goes on to compare himself, in this analogy, as being “akin” in attitude and thinking to the more radical “‘field negro’” by contrast [235].)

national apology and reparations for abuses suffered by Libyans under Italian colonialism. The Treaty, De Cesari observes,

repeatedly alludes to Italian regret for past colonial abuses, and to settlement of colonial-era disputes, *but only to declare them now settled and resolved*. The words “close” and “closure” recur every time mention is made of the colonial past. The colonial past is always defined as “the chapter of the past” or the “painful chapter of the past,” but there is no clue as to exactly what those “sufferings” involved: they are only cited to declare that the Treaty will put an end to their legacy. (317, original emphasis)

Unsurprisingly, given its sanitized wording, the Treaty’s Italian press coverage likewise made no mention of the specific atrocities for which Italy was atoning, and the alleged “reparations” the Treaty enacts actually involve the allocation of funds for Libyan infrastructural development by Italian companies as well as a range of political and economic agreements that facilitate the flow of capital across national borders while restricting human migration (319-321). Reparations, in other words, amount here to the establishment of neoliberal economic and political structures and a rhetorically constructed situation in which people are “able to speak of colonialism only in the remote past tense” (De Cesari 324).

This is not an isolated incident. Tony Barta identifies a similar dynamic in the context of the Australian government’s 2008 apology for the removal of mixed-race Aboriginal children from Aboriginal parents and communities. Framed within a discourse of “what has come to be called ‘reconciliation,’” Barta observes, the apology conspicuously avoided using “one word: genocide” (210, 206). It was meant “to validate *enough* of [Aboriginal people’s] suffering to enable ... progress with less dissent into the future,” creating a context “within which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can now ‘move on’” (Barta 210, emphasis added). In 2008 and 2009, the Canadian

government, too, offered official apologies advocating reconciliation and forgiveness for the injustices of settler colonialism. As Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Sean Coulthard argues, the apologies “ideologically manufacture[d]” a sense of historical “transition” by rhetorically “allocating the abuses of settler colonization to the dustbins of history” (108). Since these apologies, governmental policies and court rulings in Canada have continued to undercut indigenous efforts to reclaim land and material resources and maximize political self-determination, illustrating how reparations efforts by the Canadian government have aimed to render indigenous nationhood compatible with and subordinate to the sovereignty of the settler state (Coulthard 107, 122-124).

As these varied examples attest, the impulse toward closure and forgiveness that marks Faulkner’s financially figured racial discourse has perniciously structured many contemporary efforts to reckon with what white people owe for national histories of racial oppression. In the context of redress for indigenous dispossession and genocide, reconciliatory, forward-looking acts of reparation have resulted not only in insufficient (or nonexistent) material compensation but also in the disastrous tendency to downplay the extent of colonial white-supremacist violence in the past and make premature declarations about the end of white supremacy in the present.

In a specific, practical sense, I am suggesting that these colonial precedents should render us wary of black reparations models that prioritize affective and historical closure. In a general, more conceptual sense, however, I am arguing that the disappointing history of reparations for colonialism and the very real possibility that its pitfalls might be reproduced in reparations for African Americans alert us to the dangers of modeling racial justice on a particular kind of financial thinking epitomized by *The*



*Mansion* and Faulkner's nonfiction. Any act of reparations, however sincerely motivated by the goal of naming and dismantling white supremacy, will be severely compromised in its ability to achieve that goal to the extent that its *purpose* is framed as that of *paying off* white people's moral and material debt, of freeing them from indebtedness all together and ushering in a present in which it is no longer necessary for white people to think of themselves as members of a racial group with a history of violently secured privileges. So long as it is pursued with this purpose in mind, the ostensibly anti-racist commitment to reparations risks collapsing into a conservative discourse of what legal scholar Cheryl Harris has famously called "whiteness as property." Throughout its history, Harris argues, the U.S. legal system has constructed white racial identity as an exclusive "possession," one that confers "tangible and economically valuable benefits" on those who can claim it (1726). U.S. courts have affirmed time and again that "the settled *expectations*" white people have developed as a result of these benefits will be protected by law (Harris 1731, emphasis added). In its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to overturn separate but equal doctrines without mandating government programs to address the lingering inequalities produced by Jim Crow—or in its *Regents of University of California v. Bakke* ruling against affirmative action as an unfair denial of whites' ability to compete for *every* seat at an institution of higher education—the U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly ratified a "status quo" of historically sedimented racial inequality as "an accepted and acceptable base line" (Harris 1753). It has recognized the material benefits accruing to white people from that status quo as "tantamount to property that could not permissibly be intruded upon without consent" (Harris 1731). The idea of whiteness as property thus refers to a long-standing legal pattern in which "the parameters of

appropriate remedies [for racial oppression] are not dictated by the scope of injury to the subjugated, but by the extent of infringement on settled expectations of whites” (Harris 1768). Forms of reparation that prioritize closure and forgiveness—that anticipate the total elimination of white indebtedness—perpetuate this same dynamic by defining the project of dismantling institutional racism in terms that cater to white expectations. They project onto the political horizon not a sustained need for a chastened, white group consciousness (a small price to pay to help ensure that white-supremacist inclinations will not just resurface later) but an untroubled future in which the nation’s populace is, in the words of *The Mansion*, “incapable of remembering hurt or harm” and white people, while no longer “hav[ing] anything for [them],” will also no longer “have anything against [them].”

To be clear, I am not arguing here that black reparations should only be instituted if white people adopt a particular set of motivations for supporting them and a certain understanding of what reparations would mean. The capacity of material compensation for slavery and Jim Crow to make invaluable, positive differences to black communities is obviously not dependent on how white people think and feel about reparations payments. I am arguing, rather, that in order for reparations to serve as more than a stopgap measure for racialized economic inequality, white people must relinquish the expectation that reparations will result in immediate white absolution, that after reparations are paid, white people will finally be “off the hook” for past racial violence, will no longer owe anything to people of color and will be free to live as history-less individuals, “equal to any, good as any,” “all mixed and jumbled up comfortable and easy” amidst a racially harmonious America (*The Mansion* 478). The repayment of white

debt through reparations does not strike white supremacy from the historical record. It does not amount to a *Mansion*-esque denouement in which the settlement of outstanding moral debt yields a suspension of judgment and the sense that an epoch of striving is over. The repayment of white debt through reparations represents one more chapter in the *ongoing* history of slavery and its aftermath. It marks the *beginning* of white accountability for the past, not the end of it.

In relinquishing the expectation of a post-reparations future in which the history of white supremacy is consigned to an unspeakable past, white people would also relinquish the settled expectation of untroubled individualism. These are two sides of the same whiteness-as-property coin, and it is precisely because Faulkner's debt-phobic racial discourse exhibits them both that it serves as an instructive object lesson for contemporary white anti-racism. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues, the rhetoric of individualism has been crucial to how ideologies of colorblindness deploy the elements of classical liberalism to rationalize ongoing racial inequality in the present.

Individualistic thinking is a key component of "the meritocratic frame" by which whites explain the underrepresentation of minorities in employment, promotion, and higher-education as a result of discrepancies in work ethic rather than racial discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 60). It also informs both the general, neoliberal conviction "that governments should intervene in economic and social matters as little as possible" and the specific tendency of (mostly but not solely) white Americans to oppose policies that "ameliorate racial inequality because they are 'group based'" (Bonilla-Silva 61, 63). If this sounds like a precise echo of Faulkner's nonfiction claims, this should not be surprising, for as Bonilla-Silva observes, "the belief that racial change should happen

through a slow, evolutionary process in ‘peoples’ hearts’ rather than governmental action” was especially prominent during Jim Crow: it is an “old standpoint ... reformulated in the modern era to justify keeping racial affairs the way they are” (62).

Given these ideological precedents, it is quite alarming that within contemporary U.S. media, even the most insightful discussions about what white people owe for national histories of racial oppression tend to reinforce a political trajectory that ends with white individualism. In December of 2015, the American essayist Eula Biss published a piece in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled “White Debt.” Written in response to Claudia Rankine’s essay “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” Biss reflects on “what the condition of white life might be” and arrives at the phrase “‘forgotten debt’” as her most accurate shorthand. White Americans, including herself, she writes, are “moral debtors who act as material creditors.” They share “a system of social advantages” rooted in “the advent of slavery [and, we might add, indigenous dispossession] in the colonies,” and these advantages, Biss contends, are “costing” white people their “moral life.” It behooves them, therefore, to support initiatives that would allow them to discharge their moral debt by gradually dismantling the system of unjust advantages they enjoy. (One assumes that reparations would be a major priority here, though Biss never uses the term). The essay opens with an autobiographical fact: “I’m newly in debt, quite a lot of it, from buying a house. So far, my debt is surprisingly comfortable, and that’s one quality of debt that I’ve been pondering lately – how easy it can be.” Home ownership then becomes the essay’s organizing conceit, and while this makes for a very personal piece of writing, it also enables expectations of white individualism to creep in through the back door. “Once you’ve been living in a house for

a while, you tend to begin to believe that it's yours, even though you don't own it yet.

When those of us who are convinced of our own whiteness deny our debt, this may be an inevitable result of having lived for so long in a house bought on credit but never paid off." Biss' conceit dovetails nicely here with Coates' proverbial credit-card bill, but by her essay's penultimate paragraph, the home-ownership metaphor slips into a vision of the future in which racial justice amounts not to any *attenuation* of the comfortable individualism symbolized by debtless ownership of one's house but rather to that individualism's eventual vindication:

I once feared buying a house because I didn't want to be owned. I had saved money with no purpose in mind other than the freedom to do whatever I wanted. Now I'm bound to this house, though I'm still free to lose it if I choose. But that isn't the version of freedom that interests me at the moment. I'm more compelled by a freedom that would allow me to deserve what I have. Call it liberation, maybe.

Ultimately, Biss finds political hope in the idea that "debt can be repaid incrementally, *resulting eventually in ownership*" (emphasis added). Clearly, the "ownership" achieved here by paying off white debt includes a sense of rightful possession of one's home, but the desire for a morally untainted relationship to one's private property stands in for something bigger: the desire for a morally untainted relationship to one's self, articulated by Biss as the "freedom" of feeling that one "deserve[s] what [one] ha[s]," of being comfortable and secure in one's status as a self-made, self-enclosed individual, for which the feeling home ownership is an apt metaphor. While Biss' essay is entirely free from the racism running throughout Faulkner's nonfiction, the sense of white "liberation" she ultimately envisions perpetuates the Faulknerian obsession with "owing nothing to any

man,” implicitly maintaining a sense that the goal of white anti-racism is to re-secure white people’s ability to think of themselves as innocently self-made individuals.

In the second book of Faulkner’s Snopes trilogy, readers are briefly introduced to a minor character named Old Het, a poor aged black woman whose panhandling around Jefferson is the farcical stuff of local legend. Forever touting a succession of ragged “paper shopping bags” and clad in “tennis shoes and [a] long rat-colored coat trimmed with what forty or fifty years ago had been fur,” she passed daily from house to house, Faulkner writes, “travelling in a kind of moving island of alarm and consternation as she levied her weekly toll of food scraps and castoff garments and an occasional coin for snuff, moving in an urbane uproar and as inescapable as a tax-gatherer” (*Town* 242). With a “bright happy voice,” full of “strong and childlike pleasure,” Old Het serves as a source of stereotypical black comic relief in the text (241). But in a brief scene where she asks Gavin Stevens for snuff money, something in the tone and mood of her conversation—of Faulkner’s representation of her—undergoes a grave, even ominous shift, and for one fleeting moment, Old Het becomes the single most concise literary encapsulation of the white social and cultural anxieties surrounding racial debt that I have been trying to illuminate through Faulkner’s work:

“There’s some folks thinks all I does, I tromps this town all day long from can-see to cant, with a mouth full of gimme and a mouth full of much oblige. They’re wrong. I serves Jefferson too. If it’s more blessed to give than to receive like the Book say, this town is blessed to a fare-you-well because it’s steady full of folks willing to give anything from a nickel up to a hold hat. But I’m the onliest one I knows that steady receives. So how is Jefferson going to be steady blessed without me steady willing from dust-dawn to dust-dark, rain or snow or sun, to say much oblige?” (*The Town* 256)

By noting how the very gesture of supporting the black poor affords white people highly coveted moral credit, Old Het voices what is, for Faulkner, a truly horrifying prospect: the idea that white moral debt might in fact be a potentially endless condition in which white people will be forever beholden to black people—perpetually “oblige[d]” to them—for the exonerating “bless[ing]” of their propitiation and forgiveness. That Faulkner so vividly imagines this paradox as a possibility speaks not, of course, to the reality of some inordinate vindictiveness on the part of black people but to the excessive self-concern that structures white people’s relationships with them. As the whiteness-studies critic Shannon Sullivan has observed, “What is at stake for many liberal white people in their dealings with people of color seems to be achieving a self-righteous distance from whiteness and obtaining relief from the affective burdens of white guilt and shame. It should go without saying, but it is inappropriate and harmful for white people to use people of color in this way” (151). Such reductive (ab)use of people of color—this fetishization of them as vessels of white absolution—is one of the most damaging consequences of the closure- and individualism-oriented notions of white debt critiqued in this chapter, and it is precisely because the figure of Old Het embodies this dynamic in fictional miniature that she so effectively encapsulates this chapter’s argument and stakes. The fear that white people might never be able to pay off the debt they owe as a group for the sins of the past clearly crossed Faulkner’s mind, and Old Het serves as a vehicle for expressing this. But for a writer whose moral and political imagination regarded indebtedness as anathema, the fear she represents was too great to appear in the text without a dose of attenuating irony, so she could only be admitted into the novel as a figure of comic relief whose ridiculousness makes it difficult to distinguish even her most

solemn expressions from laughably glib cant. As a prime example of what Toni Morrison has called American Africanism, Old Het cannot exist as a full, complex human being (as a rounded character, in literary terms) because she carries the weight of all the anxieties and expectations derived from a white fixation on innocent, unfettered individualism. The pressure of that psychological obsession flattens her into a Dickensian grotesque, and her aesthetic disfigurement thus bears the traces of a violent racial insecurity that afflicts white people today as much as it did Faulkner over sixty years ago.

What would it mean for white people, as part of their commitment to dismantling white supremacy, to *embrace* the idea of being morally indebted to African Americans for the history of slavery and Jim Crow rather than forever anticipating the moment when they will finally be done owing black people accountability for the past? I would propose that this is the question (or rather, the aspiration) to which this whole reading of Faulkner and of contemporary white anti-racist discourse finally gives rise. Another way of phrasing this would be: what would it mean for white people to commit their time, energy, and resources to anti-racist movements *without* worrying about whether or when this will result in the clearing of their moral reputation in the eyes of black people? As I have argued, a tacit preoccupation with an ideal of innocent, debtless, unencumbered individualism has long kept white anti-racist thinking and practice stubbornly if unwittingly complicit in the perpetuation of white supremacy, often resulting in the production of distorted historical narratives that prematurely herald a racially harmonious present and future while silencing a discomfiting, compartmentalized past. Ultimately, I argue, in order for an idiom like “white debt” to serve its intended, anti-white-supremacist purpose, rather than incite such pernicious, counterproductive effects, white



people will need to work as individuals and as a group to recalibrate the way they think and feel about indebtedness as a moral condition. They will need to find ways of viewing their racial debt not as a source of incapacitating shame but as a source of identity and purpose, not something to be disavowed and frantically gotten rid of but something to be embraced for as long as it lasts, as the basis, perhaps, of a much less anxious and defensive self-respect premised upon a *humility* which, compared to a delusional and endlessly contested insistence on debtless irreproachability, might even feel, in Biss' terms, "liberat[ing]." As Shannon Sullivan has rightly observed, "A set of virtues different than the ones generated by white liberalism is needed to govern white people's involvement in racial justice movements," virtues, especially, that do not revolve around a "reassurance of moral goodness" (146). To the extent that debtless individualism has been a crucial liberal virtue governing and derailing white people's commitments to racial justice, there is a great deal riding on their ability to *own* their status as a morally indebted racial group, and it is useful to consider what kinds of conceptual developments and concrete practices this affective shift might entail. I want to close this chapter by offering a few preliminary remarks along these lines.

An anti-white-supremacist, affective reorientation toward indebtedness on behalf of white people would entail, first, making a key distinction between the repayment of white material debt and the repayment of white moral debt. By striving toward a less averse, less allergic relationship to the fact of their own racial debt, white people can weaken and eventually break the pernicious hold that an ideal of irreproachable individualism has maintained on their political imagination. This revamped relationship toward race-based indebtedness would entail that white people open themselves up to

white debt, that they not only internalize it but mine it as a source of humbling and rewarding self-awareness rather than focusing perpetually on when it will be resolved. This willingness to linger on a sense of ongoing moral indebtedness, to inhabit it with uncomplaining patience, must coexist, however, with a commitment to paying off white *material* debt as swiftly and thoroughly as possible—for instance, through reparations. This is a key point of clarification. The most effectively anti-white-supremacist orientation toward white debt that white people can adopt would be one in which that term is understood as connoting two different types of action in two different economies: a material economy in which white people would support the prompt redistribution of wealth and resources and an affective economy in which, alongside and despite this repayment of white material debt, a sense of white moral indebtedness would still persist. The distinction and seemingly paradoxical relationship drawn here between the material and moral dimensions of white debt might seem specious and illogical, but it is, in fact, part of how the nature of the problem is reflected in its solution. That any effective gesture of reparations, as indicated in the discussion above, would entail both a formal apology and material compensation signals the extent to which the dismantling of white supremacy entails both a redistribution of material wealth and an affective and ideological shift in the way white people view themselves and their nation's history. The fact that there have been so many instances of inadequate, failed reparations consisting of compensation-less apologies or apology-less compensations illustrates the extent to which progress (or attempted progress) in one vein hardly implies progress in the other, and to separate the repayment of white material debt from the repayment of white moral debt is thus to acknowledge that the dismantling of white supremacy will require from

white people something more than just support for material compensation, something along the lines of an *inner*, affective and ideological shift, which—especially for middle-class white liberals who enjoy substantial economic security—is not necessarily implied by support for reparations as an economic and institutional initiative.

I would argue that this non-material something, this thing needed from white people beyond support for institutionalized material compensation, is best defined as *accountability for other white people*, an accountability that anti-racist white liberals would concretely practice by focusing on their similarities to conservative white racists rather than their differences from them and by doing the work of confronting and dialoguing with the latter on people of color's behalf. "[S]omeone needs to talk with white supremacists," Sullivan observes, and it should be white liberals who do this because they "generally don't risk being harmed as severely as people of color by attempting to engage in respectful conversations with [them]" (51, 51-52, original emphasis). The goal of these conversations would be "to learn how [white supremacists] came to view white people as superior to people of other races and how their experiences have shaped their sense of the world" (Sullivan 48-49). It is emphatically not, that is, "to shame" them and thus create situations where "some white people who feel they 'get it' ... [can] preach to others about how to end white domination" (53, 52-53). The necessity of this affective and ideological shift pertains to how white liberals relate to white supremacists in the past as much as to those in the present. Sullivan takes equal aim, for instance, at the tendency of contemporary white liberals to regard past slaveholders "as monstrously evil and thus of no relation to white people today," a scapegoating gesture "intimately connected with the positing of good white liberals as racially innocent

angels” (61, 66). Obviously, this is not to say that past white slaveholders should be defended but that, regardless of blood ancestry, “growing up white in the United States means that white slaveholders can and should be thought of as [one’s] forebears” (Sullivan 71). Subscribing to a “false dichotomy between defending or demonizing” them merely impedes awareness of the extent to which “good white people are also flawed human beings, complicit with rather than hovering apart from white domination” (Sullivan 64, 65).

This “white middle-class othering” of both past white slaveholders and contemporary white conservatives (rich and poor) maintains “problematic assumptions about who white racists are” and exemplifies the tendency of white people, including those of the liberal middle class, “to see themselves as individuals and believe that they should be treated as such” (Sullivan 26, 72). Rather than “object to thinking of themselves as bound to other white people through their whiteness”—as being defined by one’s “racial group membership”—a white person committed to dismantling white supremacy, Sullivan argues, “should acknowledge the network of relations with white people in which she is bound and for which she is responsible. And being responsible for them means confronting how [one is] implicated in their behavior” (72). This acceptance by white anti-racists of a sense of “responsib[ility]” for the violent actions, thinking, and rhetoric of white supremacists should be understood, I am arguing, as *part* of what the phrase “white debt” implies. It is part of what white people *owe* to people of color and of what embracing the idea of their race-based moral indebtedness would necessitate on their behalf.

It is in this regard that Faulkner's fiction proves, again, instructive to contemporary white anti-racist thought, this time as a model to be emulated rather than as an object lesson in affective and ideological inclinations to be avoided. If Faulkner's work bears an impulse toward historical closure and a fixation on debtless individualism, both inimical to an effective reckoning with white supremacy, it also shows how he refused to demonize unabashedly racist whites as if they were exceptionally or uniquely evil and solely responsible for white supremacy. In November of 2016, just before the election of Donald Trump, the Argentine-Chilean-American novelist Ariel Dorfman published a short piece in *The Atlantic* emphasizing precisely this aspect of Faulkner's work and noting its relevance to our polarized historical moment. Faulkner, Dorfman writes,

lovingly and often good-humoredly portrayed the lives of those whom we might identify today, forgiving the generalization, as core Trump supporters—hunters and gun owners; ill-informed men clinging to their threatened virility and old time traditions; white Americans of small rural or economically depressed communities overwhelmed by the harsh rush of modernity, unprepared for a globalization they cannot control. Without ever condoning their racial prejudices and paranoia he also *never condescended to them*, never looked down upon their bafflement and blindness .... (emphasis added)

Faulkner's representation of Mink is a perfect case in point. Throughout *The Mansion's* opening chapter, which narrates Mink's botched attempt to winter his cow on his rich neighbor Houston's farm, Faulkner frequently calls attention to Mink's racist views toward African Americans. The figure of Houston's black farmhand, for instance, repeatedly provokes Mink's ire: "a Negro to whom Houston furnished a better house to live in than the one that he, Mink, a white man with a wife and two daughters, lived in," a Negro whom Mink "curs[ed] ... for his black skin inside the warmer garments than his"

(10, 12). As Dorfman contends, Faulkner does not “condon[e]” these racial prejudices, for they are clearly included as unsympathetic character traits, yet he also does not “condescend[.]” to Mink for bearing them. Rather than portraying him as a petty, despicable bigot, Faulkner contextualizes his racism within the broader structures of emasculating economic inequality through which it is best understood, hence Mink “cursing the Negro for his black skin inside the warmer garments than his, ... [but] cursing *above all* the unawares white man through or because of whose wealth such a condition could obtain” (*Mansion* 12-13, emphasis added). Faulkner’s phrasing here is brilliantly nuanced. He manages to capture the full extent of Mink’s indignation, including his class-based resentment toward Houston, while carefully noting that this resentment does not imply cross-racial solidarity, for Mink curses Houston not just for the sheer fact of his wealth but also *because* that wealth enables a black man to be more comfortably housed and clothed than a white one. Neither denying nor sugarcoating Mink’s racism, Faulkner also avoids reducing him to it, and by gesturing toward the well-to-do figure of Houston in the wings, he refuses any narrow vision of white supremacy in which an easily scapegoated group of unrefined poor whites are stigmatized as racists while the white rich escape scrutiny. Indeed, this refusal of any reductive, classist understanding of white supremacy informs the Snopes trilogy as a whole, which takes as its main moral and social problem Flem’s plutocratic rise to power via unbridled and remorselessly unscrupulous speculation and situates the misguidedly racist anger and frustration of someone like Mink as a structure of feeling incited by the spectacular, coveted success of Yoknapatawpha’s 1%. As Dorfman maintains, “Faulkner would have understood the roots of the present disaffection of those people he cared for so much and

the fear from which that disaffection derives, the feeling that they are trapped in a historical tide not of their making, their American dream gone berserk.”

In his uncondescending portrayals of the simultaneously bigoted and beleaguered white poor, Faulkner, in other words, displayed a kind of nuanced thinking about different groups of white people that serves as an instructive model for contemporary white anti-racism today, where the deconstruction of a pernicious “good white liberal”/“bad white racist” binary is an urgent conceptual task. This is no less true of Faulkner’s treatment of Gavin Stevens, an upper-middle-class, Harvard-educated lawyer whose simultaneous disdain for racism and obsessive concern for his own moral and social reputation creates a measured yet critical portrait of complacent and often hypocritical white liberalism. The first time Gavin appears in *The Mansion* he is chiding his nephew Chick for an anti-Semitic remark made about Linda’s late husband Barton Kohl. ““You didn’t find that at Harvard,”” Gavin tells Chick in reference to his anti-Semitism (Chick, too, being a Harvard grad like his uncle), “I thought that maybe after two years in Cambridge, you might not even recognise it again when you came back to Mississippi” (123). Throughout the novel, however, Gavin’s progressivism is revealed to have strict limits, particularly during *The Mansion*’s denouement. In 1946, 38 years into Mink’s 40-year prison sentence, Linda approaches Gavin for legal expertise, asking him how one might go about expediting Mink’s release. At this point in the novel, readers are well-aware that Linda holds a grudge against Flem for driving Eula, her mother and his late wife, to suicide. Her sudden interest in Mink is clearly related to her desire for revenge against her stepfather. Gavin, who has long held Linda as a Platonic love interest, does not (or will not) fathom that she could hold such motives, but her request

creates a dilemma for him all the same because he knows that Mink will try to kill Flem upon release. Desirous as anyone for a Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha rid of this Machiavellian financier yet loath to think of himself as knowing accomplice to murder, Gavin manages to have his cake and eat it too by trading on the fact that Linda (deafened by a shell blast while fighting in the Spanish Civil War) cannot hear. Throughout *The Mansion*, Gavin communicates to her by means of a writing pad, and he resolve (or rather, sidesteps) his moral dilemma by deciding *not* to use it when warning Linda about Mink's murderous inclinations:

He had even moved the pencil again when he stopped and spoke aloud instead; later he told Ratliff why. "I know why," Ratliff said. "You jest wanted to keep your own skirts clean. Maybe by this time she had done learned to read your lips and even if she couldn't you would at least been on your own record anyhow." "No," Stevens said. "It was because I not only believe in and am an advocate of fate and destiny, I admire them; I want to be one of the instruments too, no matter how modest." (*Mansion* 405)

Ratliff, that is, suspects that Gavin wants Flem killed but that—for the sake, if not of his public reputation, then at least of his own private self-regard—he only wants this done in a way that would allow him to say that he *tried* to stop the murder. Warning Linda by mouth rather than in print was his way of putting up a show of conscientious resistance, of being clear “on [his] own record,” while leaving an ample chance that his warning will not interfere with her plans. Gavin, however, tries to give his actions a more self-righteous spin, suggesting that he chose the means of communication more difficult for Linda to understand because he wanted, unambiguously, to be an “instrument[]” of Flem's fate regardless of the murderous implications this entails. As the final chapters of the novel unfold, it becomes clear that Ratliff's conjecture is nearer to the truth and that Gavin's involvement in the tangle of justice the Mink-Flem conflict represents is shaped



by the priority he places on his own respectability. Once Linda arranges for Mink's early release, Gavin makes one last half-hearted attempt to preempt the murder by setting up a bribe in which Mink would take \$1,000 in exchange for agreeing upon release to leave Mississippi immediately and for the rest of his life. When Ratliff wonders if they should consider Plan Bs in case Mink does not take the bribe, Gavin dismisses the concern, and it is only when the prison calls to say that Mink is left without the money that he finally admits to himself that Ratliff was right about his will to keep his own skirts clean:

"Stevens thought rapidly *So I am a coward, after all. When it happens two years from now, at least none of it will spatter on me*"—a coward for having orchestrated a series of intentionally ill-conceived obstacles to Flem's murder, leaving ample room for its occurrence while gaining the alibi of having tried to stop it (413, original emphasis).

Faulkner's critical portrait of Gavin as a white liberal, like his forbearing portrait of Mink as a poor white bigot, refuses any reductive, classist ideas about who, morally and politically, are the "good" white people and who are the "bad" ones. It should be noted, however, that even this more laudable aspect of Faulkner's fiction has its limits, for as much as he created in Gavin a rather effective case study in the shortcomings and hypocrisies of educated, middle-class white liberalism, Gavin also makes a number of passing remarks that bear alarming, counterproductive implications for racial justice and that Faulkner himself (rather than holding them up for critique through a tone of clear irony) appears to condone if not endorse. When Faulkner's black school principal approaches Gavin to ask for help in calling off Linda's overzealous and paternalistic activism, Gavin's response reveals an understanding of white moral debt better geared toward perpetuating white supremacy than dismantling it. "Just say we thank her and

will remember her, but to let us alone,” the principal requests, to which Gavin replies: “‘How can you say that to someone who will face that much *risk*, just for justice, just to abolish ignorance?’” (*Mansion* 249, emphasis added). The remark betrays a ingenuous yet no less pernicious tendency to place concern for the moral credit *white* people get (or believe they should get) for challenging white supremacy above or at least on par with the needs and wishes of the black people to whom they are allies, an obsession with one’s own moral credibility as a white anti-racist that trivializes the infinitely *greater* risk faced by people of color in challenging white supremacy and in simply moving through a white-supremacist world. I am not suggesting that involvement in anti-racist struggles is not a creditworthy commitment on white people’s behalf but that a true embrace of the idea of white moral debt—a truly anti-white-supremacist understanding of that concept and of the affective and ideological self-recalibrations it implies—would be one in which the moral credit accrued by white people for anti-racist commitments is beside the point. Emphasis on the risk that good white people take in challenging white supremacy betrays a fundamentally skewed conception of the purpose and stakes of racial justice movements and risks, in turn, perpetuating a racial-justice narrative in which the elimination of white supremacy is credited to white people. That Faulkner’s account of Linda as an activist emphasizes the tones of “alarm, fright, [and] terror in which the black voice [from fear of terroristic white backlash] would have to say Thank You” suggests that he was aware that the risks faced by Linda’s black students were greater than those faced by Linda herself (248). Yet the unresisting tone of the black principal’s response to Gavin’s comment suggests that Faulkner ultimately shared the Gavin’s sense of how regrettable it was for her brave activism to go to waste: “‘I know,’ the Principal said. ‘It’s difficult’” (249).

I cite this instance of ingenuously white-supremacist white liberalism not to stigmatize Faulkner for this racial faux pas but to acknowledge how easy it is for seemingly innocuous and reasonable impulses—like anticipations of historical closure, of vindicated individualism, or of recognition for the risks taken by anti-racist whites—to infiltrate and undercut white anti-racism. Faulkner’s instructiveness for contemporary white anti-racist thought lies both in his unwitting exhibition and thus crystallization of these impulses and in his less frequent identification and critique of them. Sometimes, as in the case of Gavin venerating Linda’s risk, Faulkner’s position with regard to such inclinations is clear (either oblivious endorsement or conscious rejection). At other times, it can be harder to tell. In the course of one of his interior monologues, for instance, Gavin contemplates the value of forgiveness and forgetting when it comes to reckoning with past wrongs: “his, Stevens’, thought was that what the world needed was more forgiving: that if you had a good sensitive quick-acting capacity for forgiving, it didn’t really matter whether you ever learned or even remembered anything or not” (*Mansion* 402). After this chapter’s discussions about reparations (and perhaps even without them), it should be clear that such thinking would be politically disastrous, especially with regard to histories of white supremacy and racial justice. On the one hand, one would like to believe that this is another instance (as with Gavin’s concerns about his own reputation) of Faulkner being critical of one of his white characters. The sweeping idea that it might not “really matter whether [one] ever learned or even remembered anything or not” seems like such an extreme and universally disagreeable conviction that it is hard to believe that Faulkner is voicing it in any way other than ironically, positioning Gavin’s wishful thinking as an object of critique. On the other hand, if one recalls the wholly un-

ironic presentation of Mink's albeit untenable wish that his bad blood with Flem could be set aside so that he and his cousin could grow old together in the sun, it seems conceivable that Gavin's thought might not be that absurd to Faulkner after all—that while it might be impractically, too lavishly articulated, it bears, at its core, a sentiment worth endorsing.

Whatever Faulkner's position toward it may be, Gavin's wishful, Pollyannaish conviction about forgiveness prompts one final stipulation about what a politically productive embrace of white debt by white people would mean. I have noted already that it would require distinguishing between the repayment of white material debt and that of white moral debt, for the latter entails an affective and ideological shift not necessarily implied by the former. It would also entail an assumption of accountability by white liberals for the ideas and actions of white conservatives, a focus on one's similarities to overt white supremacists that would mean, in turn, antiracist whites relinquishing preoccupations with their own moral goodness. I would suggest, lastly, that white people adopting a productive understanding and practice of white debt would amount to them, contra Gavin's thought, neither forgetting their history nor prematurely forgiving themselves for it but rather claiming it and, as James Baldwin once put it, "learning how to use it" (*The Fire Next Time* 333). "To accept one's past," Baldwin stipulated (speaking specifically of white people), "is not the same thing as drowning in it" (333). It means coming to terms with that history so that it can be claimed as a resource for living in the present. In his own conceptual lexicon, Baldwin described the acceptance of one's history as indicative of a capacity for self-love, where "love" is understood in turn as implying a capacity for self-criticism. "White people in this country will have quite enough to do in

learning how to accept and love themselves and each other,” Baldwin wrote; yet, as he further added, “[p]eople always seem to band together in accordance to a principle that has nothing to do with love, a principle that *releases* them from personal responsibility” (*Fire* 299, 333, emphasis added). The same idea is expressed at the start of *Notes of a Native Son*: “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually” (9). The notion of a white critical self-love—often justified through references to Baldwin—has been advocated in much recent work within whiteness studies. Sullivan herself ends her most recent monograph with a call for a “spiritually healthy [white] self-love” that is “different from that of narcissism” (124). This would be a love that includes “room for criticism of that which one loves”—of white family and friends, of one’s white self—that “*requires* such criticism as part of spiritually healthy loving” (Sullivan 160, emphasis added). And as far as white liberals’ relation to white conservatives is concerned, it would be a connective rather than distancing love, one “willing to risk complicity with the criticized object because of the love felt toward it” (Sullivan 161).

To be sure, much of Faulkner’s writing resonates with this line of thought. In his hybrid essay/short story “Mississippi,” he concluded a poignant meditation on the not-always-flattering history and people of his home state with a self-addressed closing line akin to Baldwin’s claim about the need to keep criticizing America out of love: “Loving all of it even while he had to hate some of it because he knows now that you don’t love because: you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults” (*Essays* 43). For my own part, I am more interested in history than in love—in fact, while I understand the impetus to identify affects conducive to more productive political action than white guilt

and shame, the theorization of “love” or “self-love” as a mantra or watchword for white anti-racism strikes me not only as an unnecessary rhetorical maneuver but as a dangerously slippery one. The particular kind of reckoning with white debt proposed in this chapter would result, rather, in white people accepting their group history not as source of “love”—nor of unproductive shame and guilt—but of enabling *humility*, of patient humility. It would mean (in Baldwin’s terms from the epigraph to this chapter) that white people surrender, without bitterness or self-pity, the long-held dream of historical closure and the long-cherished privilege of history-less individualism for the higher dream, the great privilege, of a black forgiveness willingly bestowed, a forgiveness earned by not obsessively anticipating it but by displaying an awareness of the scale of the debt owed by inhabiting white indebtedness with a patient concern for the flourishing of black people rather an anxious concern for one’s own moral vindication. It would mean (in Faulkner’s terms from the chapter’s second epigraph) white people working toward not have anything for them *without* expecting that this will immediately mean not having anything against them.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The main constructive criticism I received from a committee member on this chapter was that it could be improved by a discussion of how the neoliberally resonant, debt-phobic logics and structures of feeling I illuminate have affected not just white people but also the black middle-class. I agree that this could helpfully broaden the chapter’s scope, and while I was not able to incorporate this criticism into the project by the defense, I do want to gesture toward some of the ways I imagine it playing out. I think, clearly, this discussion would go somewhere in the concluding portion of the chapter, in the range of what is currently page 60 to the end, and I think one place to begin is with the work of the African American conservative public intellectual Shelby Steele. He has published a number of works that are highly critical of notions like “white guilt” and “white debt,” claiming that these concepts and feelings undermine black people’s independence and capacity to build a sense of racial pride and self-regard because it keeps black progress indebted to white compunction and charitability. Steele’s thinking quite tightly links racial equality to notions of self-made independence akin to those that Faulkner so strongly championed. Obviously, a discussion of the ways in which the black middle-class has been affected by neoliberal ideas about debt and indebtedness would need to go beyond Steele, and there’s much research I would need to do in order to more fully incorporate this constructive critique. But I do want to mention Steele as one way into the discussion. I would also note that another point I was going to raise in the chapter (not one requested by committee feedback but just part of my original conception) was some of the innovative thinking going on

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in black studies about debt as an object of celebration and means of social cohesion, especially in work by Fred Moten. The discussion would have noted the ways in which whiteness studies might draw on Moten's work, learning from some of the debt-philic philosophies and perspective in that vein of thinking. I would also, however, frame this prospect with a high degree of wariness, however, insisting very clear that the kind of thinking Moten is doing about debt as a celebratory basis for black fugitive sociality speaks to a set of material and historical conditions specific to black life that do not really map, in any straightforward way, onto white people's lived experience. Any model of thinking about how white people might cultivate a positive relationship toward debt would thus have to depart substantially from Moten's, even if it were complementary to and drew upon the latter. These are of course high speculative, low-resolution thoughts, but I hope it at least honors the constructive criticism given by this committee member and illuminates some of the ways I'd address it in a hypothetical, revised version of this dissertation.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **Your Own Worst Critic: Whiteness as Professionalism in Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night***

Perhaps that was, is, the hope of the movement: to awaken the Dreamers, to rouse them to the facts of what their need to be white, to talk like they are white, to think that they are white, which is to think that they are beyond the design flaws of humanity, has done to the world.

– Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (146)

In April of 1930, F. Scott Fitzgerald's wife Zelda suffered the first in a series of psychiatric breakdowns inaugurating a long period of institutionalization at various clinics in France, Switzerland, and the United States. The prospects of her ever making a full recovery were bleak, and her ongoing treatment caused a serious financial and emotional strain that Fitzgerald weathered through alcohol, an affair, and the half-hearted drudgery of churning out poorly remunerated short stories to cover the bills while keeping his daughter Scottie in school with a veneer of secure middle-class standing (Bruccoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur* 286-486).<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald soldiered on under these conditions for as long as he could, until sometime around the middle of the decade, when he ran out of steam and realized that he had hit rock bottom. With his marriage in shambles, his finances tanked, and his self-confidence and literary career severely atrophied, he published in *Esquire*, in 1936, a three-part essay series now collectively called "The Crack-Up," in which he reflected on the past, personal conduct that he believed had led him to the lowest point of his life.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the biography of Fitzgerald by Matthew J. Bruccoli, a less succinct but higher-resolution image of Fitzgerald's life during this time is furnished by his epistolary correspondence. See F. Scott Fitzgerald, *A Life in Letters*, 181-324.



Ultimately, Fitzgerald concluded that he had ruined himself by being too giving. He had spent the better part of his adulthood “mortgaging [him]self physically and spiritually up to the hilt,” trying to please and entertain those around him by deferring to their opinions, needs, and desires, whether those of his wife, friends, critics, or fellow writers (Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up” 72).<sup>2</sup> The result? “[T]here was not an ‘I’ any more [*sic*]—not a basis on which I could organize my self-respect” (CU 79). Fitzgerald thus announced the self-corrective intention of making a “clean break”: of rescuing what was left of his professional career by abandoning in the future all pretense to giving a damn about other people’s feelings or even the most basic moral obligations of human decency (CU 81). “I would cease any attempts to be a person,” he writes, “to be kind, just or generous” (CU 82). Newly committed to taking care of *himself*, he would have nothing to do, anymore, with anyone from whom he has “nothing to gain” (CU 83). “The old dream of being an entire man in the Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition, with an opulent American touch, a sort of combination of J. P. Morgan, Topham Beauclerk and St. Francis of Assisi, has been relegated to the junk heap” (CU 84). No more well-rounded self-cultivation, no more romance, no more political commitments, no more witty social flare, and certainly no more saint-like altruism. If Fitzgerald is to resemble any of these six men, post-crack-up, it is J. P. Morgan alone, dedicated to nothing but the successful enterprise of his business as an author. With a “heady villainous feeling,” he proclaims, “I have now at last become a writer only” (CU 82, 83).

There is something about the way Fitzgerald describes and makes sense of his own professional downfall here that speaks, I would argue, to his racial identity,

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<sup>2</sup> All further references to this essay are cited parenthetically in the chapter with the abbreviation “CU.”

something about the mixture of self-pity and self-flattery by which he positions himself as the unwitting victim of an overly kind, generous, and hard-working nature. To be sure, none of the language or imagery in “The Crack-Up” has anything, explicitly, to do with race—until, that is, the very end. In his final paragraph, Fitzgerald cynically sketches his imminent life of post-crack-up misanthropy with the help of an overtly racialized simile:

I shall manage to live with the new dispensation, though it has taken some months to be certain of the fact. And just as the laughing stoicism which has enabled the American Negro to endure the intolerable conditions of his existence has cost him his sense of the truth—so in my case there is a price to pay. I do not any longer like the postman, nor the grocer, nor the editor, nor the cousin’s husband, and he in turn will come to dislike me, so that life will never be very pleasant again, and the sign *Cave Canem* is hung permanently just above my door. I will try to be a correct animal though, and if you throw me a bone with enough meat on it I may even lick your hand. (CU 84, original emphasis)

In this final rhetorical flourish, Fitzgerald assumes a knowledge of African American experience intimate enough to judge that “the American Negro” has lost his sense of reality by using humor to survive racist conditions. The problem here is not just the presumptuousness of Fitzgerald’s judgement about African Americans’ sanity but his attempt to *claim* what African Americans have: namely, the *distinction* of having suffered, of having endured “intolerable conditions” of adversity. Fitzgerald seeks the prestige of dogged resilience under circumstances of hardship. The phrase “price to pay” is crucial here, for it is precisely the dignified solemnity of having survived only by *paying* a price (that of becoming a tough lone wolf “dislike[d]” by everyone) that Fitzgerald wants to exude for readers. In other words, while “The Crack-Up” is framed, on the whole, as a work of humbling self-criticism—a confession of the author’s character flaws and past mistakes—it is also manages, through its aesthetic tropes and hardboiled tone, to be surprisingly egotistic. Fitzgerald stylizes himself like a martyr to

the cause of solicitous selflessness, betrayed by the selfishness of others and now bitterly disillusioned with his own charitability. The essay thus offers an ironically self-aggrandizing performance of self-criticism, and while Fitzgerald's shortsighted comment about "the American Negro" does not, on its own, provide a robust, detailed way of describing what we might call the whiteness of "The Crack-Up," it does at least mark these reflections on his professional identity as reflections coming from a distinctly white subject position.

From the perspective of a reader interested in what Fitzgerald's work might contribute to discussions of whiteness, what makes "The Crack-Up" at once provocative and frustrating is the way Fitzgerald's self-aggrandizing self-pity coexists alongside mentalities and convictions that could in fact behoove middle-class white people in their efforts at humbling self-criticism. One of the essay's underlying implications, after all, is that becoming a better person might require relinquishing certain hyper-idealistic self-images and -expectations—like, for instance, a self-image that combines material success, career prestige, moral uprightness, and social affability into one blissfully innocent yet egotistical fantasy. What Fitzgerald calls his "old dream of being an entire man in the Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition" is redolent with what Ta-Nehisi Coates, in the epigraph to this chapter, describes as the "white" need to believe oneself "beyond the design flaws of humanity," not in the sense of an overtly bigoted belief that one's own race is superior to others (though that is surely part of what Coates has in mind) but in the subtler, more insidious belief that one's conduct and character are beyond critique because they align, supposedly, with universal values like kindness to others and a commitment to hard work. While not intended to do so, Fitzgerald's "old dream" is

evocative of the kind of wishfully faultless self-image that many middle-class white liberals invoke today to deny their complicity in white supremacy: that innocent sense of oneself as someone who personally harbors no discriminatory feelings toward others and has only ever aspired to be “a good person,” a self-understanding easily trotted out as a defense against charges that one is complicit in white-supremacist power structures. In an albeit loosely figurative sense, “The Crack-Up” could be said to exhibit what Coates might call one of “the Dreamers” rousing himself to the facts of what his need to be white has done—not, admittedly, “to the world” but to himself. Realizing that the “old dream” of aspiring to near-perfection is an unsustainable and self-damaging lie, Fitzgerald’s “clean break” provocatively illustrates the idea that growth can come in the form of *lowering* one’s self-estimations and not expecting that becoming a better person inevitably or immediately implies becoming more likable. As an ethical bankrupt and self-styled dog, Fitzgerald ends up avowedly *less* “beyond the design flaws of humanity” after his clean break than he was before it. The problem is that this humbling self-abasement is, to some extent, a form of false humility. It is a performance of self-criticism that backtracks its self-criticality by clinging to and spectacularizing the self-critic’s virtuous industriousness and adopting an air of mistreated victimhood through a clumsy racial simile that highlights the author’s white identity.

This initial reading of “The Crack-Up” sketches in miniature the larger project of this chapter: to demonstrate that Fitzgerald’s writings from the 1930s can help us think about forms of whiteness that inhere not in unselfconscious enjoyment of social and economic privileges and an unbothered sense of oneself as a “good person” but rather in distressed *self-consciousness* about one’s privileged social standing and in earnest yet

flawed attempts at self-criticism related to it. This chapter argues that in his fictional and nonfiction reflections upon his own identity as a working “professional,” Fitzgerald exhibited an anxious form of middle-class whiteness defined by the compulsive need to prove (to oneself) that one has *earned* any elite social and economic standing one enjoys and has lived life in a way that accords with seemingly universal ideals of moral uprightness and social accountability. Moral uprightness, of course, is not a phrase one would use to describe the Fitzgerald we end up with in “The Crack-Up,” and this is because “The Crack-Up” captures him at a point in his life when he had just decided, out of despondency and exhaustion, to *abandon* the moral standards that had structured his work and self-image prior to his professional decline in the 1930s. I positioned “The Crack-Up” as a lead in to this chapter because it provides a concise illustration of the main trope under which this chapter’s thinking about whiteness is organized: that of earnest yet partial and imperfect self-criticism. It is not “The Crack-Up,” however, that constitutes this chapter’s archive so much as Fitzgerald’s fourth novel, *Tender is the Night* (1934), which tells the semiautobiographical story of the psychologist Dr. Richard “Dick” Diver’s tragic decline from a promising young professional to a dissipated wreck after an imprudent marriage to his wealthy patient Nicole Warren. In his self-conscious work ethic and his work-ethic-based sense of identity—what I call Dick’s “professionalism”—Fitzgerald’s semiautobiographical protagonist embodies, I argue, an insecure, middle-class, male whiteness distinguished by ironically self-critical yet self-aggrandizing concerns about how one has acquired and inhabited elite positions of occupational prestige and material comfort and how such privileges may have marred one’s moral character and distorted one’s self-perception.

The moral and affective “professional” outlook that Dick brings to his work in *Tender* combines an ambitious drive for personal success with both a neurotic need to be loved and an anxious awareness of having been buoyed up in life by privileged access to social and economic resources and opportunities. Concerned that his good fortune and privileges have put him at risk of becoming a self-absorbed egotist whose professional successes derive less from his own hard work than from a lifetime of lucky advantages, Dick holds himself to a set of what are at once ego-checking and ego-boosting standards of moral exemplarity and social affability. He clings to a meritocratic self-image built around a commitment to working hard, taking risks, and growing through challenges that toughen his mettle, while, at the same time, using his professional talents and resources to make a constant show out of being of service to others—an altruism that, while admirable to some extent, is largely and consciously based in his own self-centered desire to be well-liked. In its focus on Dick Diver’s professionalism, then, this chapter illuminates a form of bourgeois whiteness characterized by a self-conscious, almost paranoid fixation on reconciling one’s comfortable social standing with fetishized notions of innocence and moral uprightness. As I demonstrate in the chapter, however, Dick’s professionalism also exists alongside—or rather, accommodates—a paternalistic male chauvinism, flashes of Aryan and Anglo-Saxon race pride, and a sententious middle-class disdain for the rich. Indeed, in both *Tender is the Night* and in nonfiction contexts like his epistolary correspondence, Fitzgerald’s specifically middle-class professional pride tends to involve a white intra-racial class conflict in which the virtues of “good” (white) people like Dick Diver and himself are emphasized by scapegoating the leisure-class rich as “bad” (white) people who lack a sense of work ethic or moral integrity. The middle-class whiteness

embodied in Fitzgerald's novel is thus defined by an anxious, self-aggrandizing form of auto-critique which, in its classed and gendered biases, is not just a form of earnest self-criticism but a form of earnest self-criticism that is also problematically incomplete.

In pursuing this line of argument, this chapter aims to build upon the work of scholars like Shannon Sullivan, who, in *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism*, explores the limitations and pitfalls affecting the types of growing yet imperfect racial awareness that many middle-class white people have now managed to achieve. Sullivan reveals, that is, "the particularities of white liberalism's style of white racism," and she does this not to shame middle-class liberal whites for the enduring shortcomings of their racial optics but to aid in the ongoing project of developing whiteness "into an identity grounded in racial justice" (4, 22). The uptake of objectives like this is a relatively recent development in whiteness studies. As explained in this dissertation's Introduction, for the past two decades, the majority of whiteness-studies scholarship has offered excellent historical, materialist analyses of how ethnic groups that at one time were not considered white "became white" by participating in racist practices against people of color. The field's general thrust has thus been to talk about whiteness in terms of the concrete institutions and practices, like slavery, naturalization law, (settler) colonialism, and redlining, on which the material privileges of whiteness have been founded. The past few years, however, have witnessed a plethora of new studies, like Sullivan's, that build upon the field's earlier work by asking, in effect: if this is whiteness' violent history, then what can white people do about it now? How can they begin to take responsibility for white supremacy in the past and present, and what kinds of behaviors and ways of thinking *obstruct* this goal? These newer works of

scholarship elucidate how many white people, bothered by their implication in historical and ongoing forms of white supremacy, have developed mindsets and strategies either for addressing this fact or for denying and obscuring it (Bonilla-Silva; Sullivan; Alcoff; Yancy; Matias). These scholars have adopted multiple approaches, with particular emphasis falling on affect-oriented analyses of white guilt, shame, and anxiety and on discourse analysis of the rhetorical strategies white people use to shore up their moral innocence (like pointing out their many black friends or appealing to abstract, “colorblind” beliefs in a meritocratically structured world).<sup>3</sup> Dissociating whiteness from white supremacy will be a lengthy and thorny endeavor, one that requires, on the one hand, optimistic sensitivity to the moments where acts of white self-reflection result in actual or potential strides toward anti-racist self-transformation and, on the other hand, vigilance about how white people’s self-criticisms often leave certain racial biases untouched or even perpetuate other biases (ones related to class and gender, for instance) in the process of working through this racial baggage. White self-criticism, in other words, will frequently be partial and flawed, but it is an iterative process, and we need to be able to discern and acknowledge the moments where it does happen, while remaining cognizant of the work that remains to be done.

*Tender is the Night*, I argue—and, to a lesser extent, “The Crack-Up”—offers a literary example of such earnest yet flawed white self-criticism in action. Having laid out this chapter’s overall framework, I want to add, at this point, an important clarification. The discourse of white self-criticism I track across Fitzgerald’s novel is not one in which

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<sup>3</sup> These affect-oriented and discourse-analysis approaches are blended together throughout the studies by Matias and Yancy. The discourse-analysis approach dominates Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists* as well as the first three chapters of Sullivan’s *Good White People*, while the affect-oriented approach predominates Sullivan’s final chapter and conclusion.



the protagonist's whiteness is *itself* the object of critique. This, of course, is the sense of white self-criticality that contemporary scholars of whiteness-studies have in mind: white people who, by voluntary self-education or by exposure to the political unrest of the racially oppressed, have been made aware of their racial identity *as* a problem (whether they respond to this by committing to further self-criticism in an act of racial solidarity or by grasping at various discourses of self-exculpation). It has taken until the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, however, for this type of white racial self-awareness to develop on a large scale, and Fitzgerald was a man of his time. Coming of age as he did in a world steeped in the culture and politics of Jim Crow, nativism, eugenics, and vaudeville minstrelsy, Fitzgerald never thought of himself as "white" in any problematic sense. Indeed, in a perfect example of the kind of racial discourse historians in whiteness studies have meticulously elaborated, Fitzgerald was highly self-conscious about what he called the "black Irish" half of his ancestry (*Life in Letters* 233).<sup>4</sup>

Fitzgerald's semi-autobiographical protagonist, then, is not self-critical *because* he is white and because he understands whiteness as a racial identity haunted by a horrific history of violence. Dick is self-critical, rather, about the material privileges that have buoyed him up to a position of professional and social prestige. Those privileges themselves, however—along with the anxieties they engender about being seen as someone who has *earned* one's successes and who is kind and generous and "good," despite one's position of socioeconomic comfort—are products of Dick's whiteness,

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<sup>4</sup> See also Fitzgerald's July 1921 letter to Edmund Wilson in which he speaks, among other things, about the "negroid streak creep[ing] northward to defile the nordic race" and Italians having "the souls of blackamoors" (*A Life in Letters*, 47). I will have more to say later about the place of race in Fitzgerald's thinking and in Fitzgerald scholarship, but for a succinct overview of this topic, see Suzzane del Gizzo, ("Ethnic Stereotyping").

regardless of whether he or his creator note them as such. What interests me about the discourse of professionalism in Fitzgerald's work is not that it provides an example of a middle-class white man consciously interrogating his own whiteness but that it provides an example of a middle-class white man who is at least uneasy about a host of social and economic privileges that *derive* from his whiteness (whether he marks them that way or not) and whose anxious attempts to fashion himself as someone who has earned and made selfless use of those privileges constitutes a nominally self-critical yet persistently self-exculpating form of whiteness instructive even to white people today whose self-criticisms include a conscious sense of their whiteness as such. This instructiveness is especially keen insofar as the discourses of professionalism played out in *Tender* and "The Crack-Up" fall back, in their self-exculpating moments, on a language and rhetoric of meritocracy, a blinkered faith in the equation of moral goodness with hard work, which is a major part of how neoliberal white supremacy is articulated today in seemingly race-neutral, economically coded terms. "[M]y experience in this world has been," writes Coates, "that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration. And the word *racist*, to them, conjures, if not a tobacco-spitting oaf, then something just as fantastic—an orc, troll, or gorgon" (*Between the World and Me* 97, original emphasis). I hope this chapter's reading of *Tender is the Night* helps to stem the tide of such tendencies. In addition to revealing a whole new way of reading race in Fitzgerald's work, I offer an analysis in which whiteness takes the form not of some monstrous display of ignorance or cruelty but rather that of a polished professional earnestly striving to be a man of integrity and service to others, someone

whose determination to be an exceptionally good person renders him capable only of an incomplete, ironically self-pitying, self-aggrandizing form of self-criticism.

The first section of this chapter begins by outlining, in greater detail, the affective and moral components of Dick Diver's "professionalism." I start with a brief summary of *Tender's* overall plot and structure, then illuminate the psychic anatomy of Dick's professional identity by breaking his professionalism down into three main parts. I then turn to sociological and historical scholarship on professionalization to bring some of the key elements of Dick's professionalism into further relief as well as situate them within a larger historical and social context. With this argumentative scaffolding then established, Part II embarks on an in-depth close reading of Fitzgerald's novel. I show how Dick's self-critical professionalism plays out over the course of the novel as form of concerted yet imperfect auto-critique. Worried that his personal history of good fortune might weaken his character, Dick frets over his own moral integrity and tries to hold himself to exceedingly high standards, yet this self-criticism proceeds in ways that involve an enduring male chauvinism, a vague Aryan/Anglo-Saxon race pride, a sententious middle-class scapegoating of the leisure-class rich, and a meritocratic belief in the self-exonerating value of hard work. Part III closes by offering a short debrief on the reading offered in the preceding two sections. I contrast my approach to reading race in this novel to the ones taken thus by Fitzgerald critics thus far and underscore the stakes of this reading by gesturing toward the enduring and not unproblematic place of the professions and professionalism in our neoliberal present.

## I. Enter: The Professional

In the correspondence it occasioned between herself and her husband and between her husband and her doctors, Zelda's psychiatric collapse brought Fitzgerald into extensive reflection on the nature of his professional work as a writer, especially insofar it illustrated, in his view, crucial differences between his wife's character and his own. A letter to one of Zelda's doctors provides a typical case in point (the underlining is Fitzgerald's):

During my young manhood for seven years I worked extremely hard, in six years bringing myself by tireless literary self-discipline to a position of unquestioned preeminence among younger American writers, also by additional "hack-work" for the cinema ect. [sic] I gave my wife a comfortable and luxurious life such as few European writers ever achieve. My work is done on coffee, coffee and more coffee, never on alcohol. At the end of five or six hours I get up from my desk white and trembling and with a steady burn in my stomach, to go to dinner. Doubtless a certain irritability developed in those years, an inability to be gay which my wife—who had never tried to use her talents and intelligence—was not inclined to condone. It was on our coming to Europe in 1924 and apon [sic] her urging that I began to look forward to wine at dinner—she took it at lunch, I did not. (Fitzgerald, *Life in Letters* 196, underlining in original)

By appealing to his role as breadwinner as a basis for authority, Fitzgerald routinely reminded Zelda's doctors of the contrast between his indomitable work ethic and her lack thereof (often as a way of deflecting her own well-evidenced charges against the destructive force of his drinking upon their marriage). To be clear, his criticism was never that Zelda lacked ambition or talent. He recognized that her exhaustive determination to excel at ballet, for example, was part of what pushed her to a breaking point, and he and her doctors continually tried to facilitate her recovery by limiting the time she could devote to dancing, painting, and writing while institutionalized (Brucoli, *Some Sort* 288-289, 310; Fitzgerald, *Life in Letters* 212-213, 219-221). Rather, his criticism was that

Zelda had neither the discipline nor the stamina to put her skills to purposive use and that she had no sense of hard work as an occasion for sacrifice and commitment. She labored, Fitzgerald alleged to one of her clinicians, under the “abnormal illusion . . . that her work’s success will give her some sort of divine irresponsibility backed by unlimited gold” (*Life in Letters* 230). “There is a vague form in her mind,” he lamented, “of ‘go on—do what you want—All I want is a chance to work.’ The only essential that she leaves out is that I also want a chance to work, to cease this ceaseless hack work that her sickness compells [*sic*] me to” (*Life in Letters* 213). Throughout these frustrations runs the insistence that his wife’s institutionalization had taken the form of “a very expensive chance to satisfy her desire for self-expression” paid for by his own time and money (Fitzgerald, *Life in Letters* 213).

Fitzgerald’s resentful disappointment over the dissipation of his own professional talent lies at the heart *Tender is the Night*. The novel encodes his reflections upon his own professional self-image and work ethic and the deterioration prompted by having to care for an ailing member of the American leisure class. Fitzgerald did not translate this autobiographical situation one-for-one into the text. *Tender is the Night* is divided into three Books, none of which are narrated exclusively from a single perspective, though each is dominated nonetheless by one character’s point of view. The young actress and ingenue Rosemary Hoyt focalizes Book One. After recent success starring in her first film, Rosemary has come with her mother to vacation on the Riviera in 1925, where she meets and falls in love with the stylish Dick and Nicole Diver and begins a flirtatious romance with the former. Fitzgerald uses Rosemary to provide a naïvely romantic picture of the Divers while his omniscient narrator occasionally intervenes to tip readers off to

cracks in their polished social façade that the smitten Rosemary does not see. Book One ends on the cliffhanger of Nicole relapsing into a psychiatric break, in the middle of which Fitzgerald abruptly cuts the story and segues to the next Book. Focalized through Dick, Book Two begins by jumping back eight years to narrate his emergence as a budding psychologist, the courtship of his patient Nicole Warren, and eventually their marriage, at which point we are returned, story-wise, to where Book One left off. As Nicole's condition improves, her dependence on Dick fades along with the romantic passion her dependency once brought, and it becomes increasingly clear that their marriage and indulgent lifestyle are doing little other than preventing Dick from new work. He continues to offset the awareness of his marital and professional decline through his liaisons with Rosemary until she, too, outgrows him. Book Three, finally, assumes Nicole's point of view and completes the chiasmus of the overall plot by narrating her blooming strength and confidence alongside her husband's continuing decline. Dick eventually "saves" himself by consciously allowing their marital dysfunction to progress to the point where both he and Nicole are prepared for a divorce, whereby he can "transfer" her to their friend Tommy Barban, a French-American soldier who has coveted Nicole from the beginning of the story and been increasingly aggressive in courting her as her weakening attachment to Dick becomes apparent.

Written during the early 30s but set over a period from 1919 to 1929, *Tender is the Night* serves as an aesthetic vehicle through which Fitzgerald can re-trace his steps through the Jazz Age and review his past conduct in order to assess the origins of the downward spiral he was suffering in the present. As we have seen already from both "The Crack-Up" and his epistolary correspondence with Zelda's doctors, a tremendous

part of Fitzgerald's ego revolved around his identity as a "professional," his sense of his own indomitable work ethic, the discipline and hours he put into his specialized craft, and the socioeconomic prestige this professional standing was supposed to grant him. It is thus unsurprising that more than any other aspect of Dick's character, Fitzgerald emphasizes the professional identity of *Tender*'s semi-autobiographical protagonist. The work ethic, affective tendencies, and moral aspirations comprising what we might call Dick Diver's professionalism are established early in the novel and serve as both the engine and gauge of the narrative's progression. In the opening sections of Book Two—the chronological start of the story—Dick arrives in Zurich in 1919 to begin his career at a clinic where Nicole Warren is one of the patients. Before that ever romance begins, however, Fitzgerald spends about 20 pages revealing to readers Dick's private hopes and anxieties about the trajectory of his career and how the nature of his professional will reflect upon his character. The opening pages of Book Two, then, provide a detailed portrait of the morals, aspirations, and self-image characterizing Dick's professional identity, which serves as a reference point for gauging his decline over the rest of the novel. Dick's professionalism, I argue, can be characterized by three points.

The first and most straightforward of these is a simple aspiration toward preeminence captured in Dick's frank avowal to his colleague, Franz Gregorovius, that his one goal is "'to be a good psychologist—maybe to be the greatest one that ever lived'" (Fitzgerald, *Tender* 132).<sup>5</sup> However it may appear on the surface, this desire for greatness is not a sign of mere egotism, and misunderstandings of it as such are prevented by the second feature of Dick's professionalism: a hyper-self-conscious anxiety over

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<sup>5</sup> All the quotations from the novel are hereafter cited parenthetically with the abbreviation "TN."

having been given a too-easy ride to the top. By 1917, at the age of 26, Dick's educational history had come to include Yale, Oxford, and Johns Hopkins, and now, in 1919, he continues his studies in France and Switzerland while being enlisted with the good fortune of having only "seen around the edges of the war" despite, as he admits to Franz, "'draw[ing] military pay all the rest of the year if I only attend lectures at the university'" (TN 115, 132). It is one of the most conspicuous features of Dick's psyche that he is consistently paranoid about the detrimental effects of having *not* been faced with challenges and setbacks in his formative years. Eavesdropping on his private thoughts, the narrator reveals this obsession as a running theme of the young Dick's nervously self-deprecating reflections:

"—And Lucky Dick can't be one of these clever men; he must be less intact, even faintly destroyed. If life won't do it for him it's not a substitute to get a disease, or a broken heart, or an inferiority complex, though it'd be nice to build out some broken side till it was better than the original structure." (TN 116)

Knowing "that the price of his intactness was incompleteness," the insecurity of being too secure in his success underlies Dick's compulsion to be the greatest psychologist that ever lived (TN 117). "[M]en and women had made much of him" in recent years, and "an intuition that this was not too good for a serious man" provokes an intense fear of resting on his laurels (TN 133).

Dick's theory is that by working on the front lines of his discipline, pushing boundaries and going where no psychologist has gone before, he can expose himself to the kinds of dangers that will make him a better man by breaking him in. "The weakness of this profession," he warns Franz, "is its attraction for the man a little crippled and broken. Within the walls of the profession he compensates by tending toward the clinical,



the ‘practical’—he has won his battle without a struggle” (TN 137-138). Dick’s incautious decision to marry a patient and combine the normally separate roles of husband and doctor is a conscious attempt to turn his career into a mettle-building crucible, a gesture in which professionalism connotes a meritocratic work ethic designed to dignify one’s character with the distinction of having *struggled* one’s way to prestige rather than receiving it on a silver platter.

The third and final characteristic of Dick’s professionalism, however, is the qualification that these commitments both to pioneering hard work and to just desserts are based neither in an impersonal concern for the status of his field nor in a disinterested matter of moral principle. There remains behind them the hope, if not the expectation, that such sacrifice and self-discipline will result in the payoff of *being admired*. Dick, in other words, “wanted to be good, he wanted to be kind, he wanted to be brave and wise, but it was all pretty difficult. He wanted to be loved, too, if he could fit it in” (TN 133). This modest wish would seem reasonable if Fitzgerald weren’t being tongue-in-cheek in the gingerly touch with which his narrator notes this aspect of Dick’s professional aspirations. Here, at the chronological beginning of the story, Dick’s need to be loved is only barely intimated (though the intimation is still tonally ominous). In fact, however, the narrative progression of Dick’s professional decline is punctuated by a slew of situations in which a paternalistic savior complex, driven by this need to be loved, compels him to the rescue of those in mental, physical, or even legal danger. Marrying Nicole is only the first and most bindingly consequential instance of Dick “mortgaging [him]self physically and spiritually up to the hilt” (Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up” 72). The whole arc of the novel clarifies for readers that far from being something merely to be

had “if he could fit it in,” Dick’s need to be loved is not an afterthought so much as an addiction. Toward the end of the book, when he decides to rescue two acquaintances whose partying shenanigans have gotten them in trouble with the police, this compulsion is explicitly identified as a kind of tragic flaw: “the old fatal pleasingness, ... with its cry of ‘Use me!’” according to which he had originally married Nicole: “[w]anting above all to be brave and kind, he had wanted even more than that, to be loved. So it had been. So it would ever be” (TN 302). Reprising the line so gingerly planted earlier, Fitzgerald leaves no ambiguity about *his* interpretation of his protagonist’s fall: Dick’s tragedy is grounded in a habitual altruism that bespeaks not an ego so secure and overflowing with self-confidence that it cannot help but help others but one that stifles insecurity by dramatically giving itself away to the paternalistic service of others out of a desperate need for affirmation.

As a set of moral and affective inclinations entailing the inextricability of one’s identity and work ethic, this, then, is the model of professionalism that provides the foundation for the novel. It is marked by what we might call a *self-interested selflessness*. In Fitzgerald’s text, the professional is he whose work of making pathbreaking achievements in a field of specialized knowledge doubles as the arena for a personal struggle not to overcome some bad hand dealt by fate but, on the contrary, to save oneself from the danger and embarrassment of having been dealt pocket aces. The professional struggles to be able to *say* that he has struggled, that he has faced and endured adversity and can thus exonerate himself to his own moral conscience with the assurance that an assortment of inherited privileges have not made him soft and that his prestige and authority have been hard-earned. This self-serving work ethic is also the means by which

he endears himself to a wider public on the grounds of having selflessly given excessive amounts of his time and energy to ameliorating the quality of life of any number of individual clients or contributing to the fund of human knowledge as a whole.

Professionalization, as a political, economic, and sociological process played out at the level of both individuals and groups, has been the focus of its own scholarly field for decades, and the figure cut by Fitzgerald's protagonist resonates with certain elements in this scholarly corpus while downplaying others. The general contours of the rise-of-the-professions narrative are a matter of relative consensus. As described by Magali Sarfatti Larson, professionalization, which began in the first half of the nineteenth century and culminated at the turn of the twentieth, was "a collective process of upward social mobility" pursued by middle-class workers in the fields of medicine, law, and engineering (xvi).<sup>6</sup> Its purpose was to produce and monopolize a market for the products and services made possible by new forms of specialized training and expertise. As Larson emphasizes, this process required the gradual standardization of products—i.e., expert knowledges and services offered on the market—via standardization of producers—i.e., the professionals themselves, who would submit to increasing uniformity and exclusivity within their fields by way of licenses, qualifying exams, and common educational curricula that made membership to a profession dependent both on the acquisition of a standardized body of knowledge (almost always available only through universities) and on bureaucratized credentials whose authority would be legally sanctioned as the professions sought state recognition for their expertise (Larson 9-52; Bledstein; Freidson 17-123).

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<sup>6</sup> On the historical dating of this broad sociological and economic process, see in particular Larson, 2-8 and 80-125.

Scholarship on the professions is thus particularly keen on how the development of highly specialized knowledges and skills and the strict management of rarified access to them enables the structuring and re-structuring of social and economic inequality.<sup>7</sup> This element of professionalization is especially highlighted by Barbara and John Ehrenreich who suggest that during the Progressive Era, in order to consolidate fields like public education and health care into arenas requiring scientific intervention by “experts,” many services that had once been “an indigenous part of working-class culture were edged out by commodities conceived and designed outside of the class” (17, 16). In a key example of Progressive-Era class conflict, a “professional-managerial class” of inspectors, administrators, and authorities found occupational niches in schooling, sanitation, child rearing, recreation, and more via claims to objective expertise that enabled them to organize these activities with “‘efficiency,’ ‘order,’ and rationality” (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 23). If the acquisition and display of credentialed scientific expertise is taken as the primary indicator of professional status, however, Fitzgerald’s protagonist would hardly appear on the radar. As Matthew J. Bruccoli has observed, a frequent criticism of the novel is that “Dick is not a convincing figure as a psychiatrist” because he is rarely portrayed exercising the clinical knowledge and skills that would illustrate his specialized training (*Composition* 84). Bruccoli’s defense of Fitzgerald on this charge is partly correct but also misleading: “Fitzgerald never intended to write a professional novel. His novel is not specifically about a psychiatrist. It is about Dick

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<sup>7</sup> This is what Larson foregrounds when she refers to a “monopoly of competence legitimized by officially sanctioned ‘expertise’” that “leaves the public without legal or credible alternatives” to the pricey services provided by credentialed professionals (38). Likewise, she observes, the exclusivity of university admissions and the many batteries of tests and other qualifications prevent “the overproduction of professional producers [which] may cause the price of professional services or labor to fall” (42).

Diver, who is a psychiatrist. ... [T]he absence of medical details from the novel was planned” (*Composition* 84). To say that *Tender* is “about Dick Diver” who only happens to be a psychiatrist is correct, but that is not mean that *Tender* is thus not “a professional novel.” What it indicates is that Fitzgerald was interested in a concept of professionalism that was more about the professional’s affective subjectivity and moral character (his “personality”) than his possession of objective knowledge and its standardized application (his “expertise”).

In embodying professionalism as a matter of personality more than expertise, Fitzgerald’s Dick Diver brings into vivid relief what we might call the ideological rather than socioeconomic side of the professionalization phenomenon: the set of ideas, values, and narratives invoked to justify or apologize for the economic privileges and social prestige accorded to the professions and their elite cadre of workers. As the professions establish a monopolized market for their specialized goods and services as well as an elite educational system by which professional knowledges are standardized and distributed, professionalization as a project, Larson argues, “passes from a predominantly economic function—organizing the linkage between education and the marketplace—to a predominantly ideological one—justifying inequality of status and closure of access in the occupational order” (xvii). Elite professionals, in other words, have to establish “social credit” with their nonprofessional consumer base by ensuring that the pursuit of specialized knowledge and work is driven by something other than a bid for social authority and an impressive salary (Larson 56).

One of the most effective weapons in this ideological arsenal is what critics often call *the service ideal*: the notion, whether in medicine, law, or engineering, that

professionals pursue and exercise their expertise for the sake of “the public interest,” that they work according to a drive that “does not obey first to the profit motive, but seeks first to improve the *quality* of life” of their clients and of society as a whole (Larson 57, 58). In a phrasing with clear resonance to the Ehrenreichs’ idea of the professional-managerial class and its bourgeois control of the working class, Larson calls this the professions’ “civilizing function” (58).<sup>8</sup> Eliot Freidson takes this idea of the service ideal even further, enshrining it as a professional standard with scarce empirical reality, perhaps, but well worth pursuing *as an ideal* nonetheless:

The professional ideology of service goes beyond serving others’ choices. Rather, it claims devotion to a transcendent value which infuses its specialization with a larger and putatively higher goal .... Each body of professional knowledge and skill is attached to such a value, one sometimes shared by several disciplines. ... Such values as Justice, Salvation, Beauty, Truth, Health, and Prosperity are large, abstract, and on the face of it indisputably desirable, the devil, of course, being in the details. Nonetheless it is because they claim to be a secular priesthood that serves such transcendent and self-evidently desirable values that professionals can claim independence of judgment and freedom of action rather than mere faithful service. (122)

To be clear, Freidson’s study is a cautious yet impassioned defense of professionalism as a set of ideas and principles comprising a “logic” for structuring the social division of labor. He contends that “free-market” or “bureaucratic” logics (the ones he opposes to the logic of professionalism) have become increasingly rampant in recent decades with disastrous social and political results. Despite having their own imperfections, reprising certain “professional” mores *like* the service ideal, Freidson argues, is a valuable

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<sup>8</sup> For a particularly literal example of the so-called “civilizing function” of the professions during Fitzgerald’s time, see Emily S. Rosenberg’s account of the imperialist advisory missions to Latin and Central America made by U.S. experts in foreign finance in *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (see especially Chapter 7, “Faith in Professionalism, Fascination with Primitivism”). As Rosenberg explains, finance itself was an economic profession and sub-speciality crystallizing in the early twentieth century.

corrective.<sup>9</sup> This line of reasoning enables Freidson (not entirely convincingly) to argue that professionals go through all their training and put in all their hours because they are good people with admirable values rather than because of their paygrade: they “work more for the satisfaction gained in performing their work well than for its role in providing them with a good living” (Freidson 108).

The other major fixture of professionalism’s ideological arsenal is the idea of meritocracy as an explanation for the persistence of inequality under democratic conditions. In the wake of professionalization as a social, economic, and political project, Larson writes, “[e]lite status” was no longer claimed according to older, “aristocratic” criteria but rather “on a new basis—that of competence, as defined and measured by a system of testing” (70). Larson is emphatic about the extent to which professionalism’s meritocratic ideology suffuses public discourse with the idea of an “illusory road to high status” accessible to all:

The prestige accorded year after year to the professions in occupational prestige scales reflects the ideological function which they perform simply by being visible: in our society, they keep ‘open’ the road to freedom through *more* formal education, through *more* individual effort; they appear to be our last ideological frontier. The link they visibly establish between education and the labor market reinforces the ideological notion that there *is* such a link, and that rewards—both material and psychological—are, after all, *rationally* distributed to the ablest and the hard-striving. (242, original emphases)<sup>10</sup>

Enjoying economic security and sociocultural prestige along with the opportunity of immense self-cultivation via schooling and training, professionals are the class of workers, perhaps more than any others, who come closest to embodying what Fitzgerald

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<sup>9</sup> For Freidson’s idea of professionalism as a “logic,” see *Professionalism* 1-14. For his account of the free-market and bureaucratic forces currently competing with and eclipsing it, see 179-222.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of the link between professionalism and meritocratic ideologies, see Bledstein, 7, 21, 127.

would call the old dream of being an entire man: “Education, intelligence, persistent effort, and social usefulness appear to grant professionals ... the possibility of full human development” (Larson 242).

What I aim to show here is that Fitzgerald *sees through* this ideological façade. He both sympathizes with yet ultimately punctures and deflates the idea of a professional ego premised on achieving occupational success, economic prosperity, social prestige, and lovability all at once. We have already begun to see how and where this occurs in “The Crack-Up”—the cynical “clean break” from an impossibly self-idealizing old dream (topped with the rhetorical cherry of a racist simile.) But the clean break self-prescribed in that essay *follows* from the self-diagnostic work performed through *Tender*’s fictional medium. The moral and affective complex outlined above as Dick’s professionalism evokes, with remarkable precision, the central elements of the privilege- and inequality-justifying ideology described by professionalization’s critics. Dick’s deep-seated compulsion to cultivate his own social popularity and approval through extravagant displays of his capacity to help others blatantly and even neurotically embodies the professions’ service ideal, and ideas of meritocracy permeate his conviction that “the price of his intactness was incompleteness,” that one becomes the greatest psychologist that ever lived not by having it easy but by facing trials and tribulations that build one up by breaking one in (*TN* 117). I have noted that these moral and affective inclinations are present at the *beginning* of the novel, but the novel’s actual *progression*—the real substance of *Tender*’s narrative—is the process by which these young, starry-eyed aspirations become untenable and Dick spirals into self-dissipation attempting to realize them.



In what follows, then, I trace a critique of professionalism embedded in the trajectory of *Tender*'s narrative, a critique that is not exhaustive. It does not work, that is, by rejecting *every* aspect of the professional ethos that serves as the narrative's engine and point of origin. As the novel progresses, Dick's desires to be the greatest psychologist that ever lived and to be loved while doing it gradually eclipse his professionalism's third element: the meritocratic injunction to keep oneself in rare form—morally, occupationally, and psychologically—by ensuring that one's prosperity and prestige are the result of sustained exposure to consistent challenges that toughen one's mettle. Under the socioeconomic conditions of decadent luxury that pervade the historical milieu of the novel's Jazz-Age, leisure-class story, the aspect of Dick's professional identity most susceptible to deterioration is its meritocratic basis. The more his wife's money draws him away from work, the less his prosperity can be justified as merit-based and the more he tries, in conscious self-delusion, to retain the idea of his own goodness by using his material wealth and social charms either to bail people out of trouble or cater to their emotional needs by lavishing them with attention and intimacy at parties or other social gathers—the more he tries, that is, to compensate his lack of hard work by literally *paying* tribute to an ersatz, leisure-based service ideal. Just as in Fitzgerald's autobiographical crack-up, Dick's inclination to “mortgag[e] [him]self physically and spiritually up to the hilt” does not save his professional standing but rather destroys it, and the novel thus ends with divorced and disgraced, a martyr to his own work-eschewing selflessness. *Tender*'s critique of professionalism's ideology, in other words, is only partial. In Fitzgerald's narrative formulation, the service ideal—the need to be loved—is what ruins Dick; the meritocratic ideal is what, ostensibly, could have saved

him. (The solution of a selfish commitment to one's own professional labor is *implied* rather than actually played out in *Tender*, as the novel ends, morosely, with Dick drifting in companionless professional obscurity. This solution *is* played out, however, just a few years later in "The Crack-Up," where Fitzgerald proclaims his newfound, selfish determination to be "a writer only." The essay's grim "clean break" performs the selfishness that Dick could not bring himself to perform in the novel.)

These are the parameters of the partial critique of professionalism's ideology embedded in the novel. My reading tracks the multiple ways in which this critique manifests within the text: as a sententious discourse of leisure-class-bashing meritocracy suffusing the entire novel as well as routine interrogations of Dick's selfless serviceability, interrogations that invalidate it on the grounds of both its recklessly self-exhausting consequences and the fact that it is motivated, at bottom, by selfish motives anyway (Dick's need to be loved). What interests me in all of this is the way that Fitzgerald's portrayal of an idealized professionalism *and* his *critique* of it illustrate a self-conscious mentality with regard to how one inhabits a position of social and economic privilege: how one reflects upon, edits, and carries oneself in a way that persuades both oneself and others that one's privileged social positioning is simply the outward manifestation of and well-deserved reward for an inward exceptionality of character. This aspect of how Fitzgerald characterizes and portrays *Tender's* protagonist is the basis for my claim that his reflections on his own professional work ethic and identity in *Tender* furnish valuable insights for theorizing whiteness. I seek to trace the contours of what I am suggesting is a characteristically "white" kind of auto-critique—trace them in order, of course, to critique this auto-critique, this form of self-criticism in

which a genuine concern that one's self-estimation has been distorted by long-term or lifelong enjoyment of socially and economically advantageous circumstances leads to a concerted effort to check and curb that self-estimation *in a way*, however, that still allows for the re-introduction of ego-conserving, self-exculpating rationalizations through the back door. This is the form of auto-critique modeled by *Tender*, one in which Fitzgerald's efforts to take himself down a peg by exposing (through Dick) the way his supposedly selfless penchant for people pleasing is rooted, at bottom, in an ingratiating to be loved coexists with a variety of residually self-aggrandizing ideas and practices, including, as I will show, an enduring male chauvinism, a meritocracy-touting, white-intraracial, middle-class scapegoating of the rich, and even a vague form of Aryan and Anglo-Saxon race pride.

## **II. Race Work: Notes on the Manners of a Professional Son**

The formal and stylistic features of Fitzgerald's initial presentation of the young Dick Diver palpably indicate the skeptical and critical nature of the author's relationship to Dick's idealistic professionalism. The first two sentences of Book Two read,

In the spring of 1917, when Doctor Richard Diver first arrived in Zurich, he was twenty-six years old, a fine age for a man, indeed the very acme of bachelorhood. Even in war-time days, it was a fine age for Dick, who was already too valuable, too much of a capital investment to be shot off in a gun. (TN 115)

From the beginning of this portrait of the professional as a young man, Fitzgerald qualifies the narrative with a tonal wink to the reader, a gentle note of compensatory over-indulgence ("a fine age ... indeed the very acme ...") that signals a transparent attempt to capture this protagonist in just the right light to make him appear more heroic

than he will actually prove to be—to make him appear, that is, superficially heroic to the point where his seeming imperviousness can be made the butt of a subtle, sarcastic joke. Dick’s grand stature, in other words, is being humored, and the reader is explicitly positioned as in on it. Thus, after a few pages of backstory detailing the impressive educational and pre-professional achievements of Dick’s early years, Fitzgerald concludes the first section of Book Two with a paragraph of self-reflexive meta-discourse that heralds Dick’s future success with such dripping irony as to leave the reader convinced that his youthful vigor and idealism really augurs nothing but trouble:

The foregoing has the ring of a biography without the satisfaction of knowing that the hero, like Grant, lolling in his general store in Galena, is ready to be called to an intricate destiny. Moreover it is confusing to come across a youthful photograph of some one [*sic*] known in a rounded maturity and gaze with a shock upon a fiery, wiry, eagle-eyed stranger. Best to be reassuring—Dick Diver’s moment now began. (*TN* 118)

The allusion is to Ulysses S. Grant, who worked for a period in his family’s store in Galena, Illinois, before leading the Union Army to victory in the Civil War and becoming the 18<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. The joke, then, is that having read Book One and thus known him in the “rounded maturity” of 1925—stagnating professionally and compensating for his strained marriage through an affair with a girl half his age—the reader knows that Dick’s biography does not have the upward trajectory of Grant’s military career and can rest reassured that whatever “intricate destiny” awaits Dick after 1917, it is not one of ascendancy but decline.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Grant allusion at the start of Book Two forms one of two bookends to the story as a whole, syncing up with a second allusion to Grant in the novel’s final paragraph that echoes the morbidly ironic tenor of the first. As with the majority of Book Three, the novel’s final paragraph is focalized through Nicole, now remarried to Tommy Barban yet keeping up with news on Dick’s whereabouts and always remembering him with loving fondness. All that Nicole can gather is a scant paper trail of letters whose post markings indicate that Dick is practicing in obscure corners of the map in upstate New York and whose contents include unconvincing reports that he is enjoying moderate success (Nicole heard that he “*always* had a big

As Kirk Curnutt notes in what is arguably the best account of *Tender's* form, Fitzgerald frequently uses his omniscient narrator to preclude the reader's overly sympathetic identification with his hero, ironizing Dick by pointing out the oversights in his judgments about himself and others (Curnutt 137). The narrator notes, for example, that "Dick got up to Zurich" with a host of typically American, Manifest-Destiny "illusions of eternal health and strength" instilled by "the lies of generations of frontier mothers who had to croon falsely, that there were no wolves outside the cabin door" (*TN* 117). Curnutt also notes, however, that the novel's form is not geared only toward dissuading sympathy for the protagonist: Dick is a tragic hero, ruined by his own professional hubris, but he is still the hero nonetheless, and the author has to temper the criticism he invites on Dick's behalf. Curnutt contends that Fitzgerald does this by punctuating the moralizing, omniscient, realist component of the novel's form with a more disorienting set of modernist narrative techniques, which prevent the attribution of Dick's decline solely to his own unchecked idealism by incorporating a cacophony of voices and motives from other characters who affect Dick's professional trajectory, particularly Nicole and her sister Beth "Baby" Warren (Curnutt 124, 137-140).<sup>12</sup>

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stack of papers on his desk that were known to be an important treatise on some medical subject, *almost* in process of completion" [*TN* 315, emphases added]). The novel's final sentence reads: "Perhaps, so she liked to think, his career was biding its time, again like Grant's in Galena; his latest note was post-marked from Hornell, New York, which is some distance from Geneva and a very small town; in any case he is almost certainly in that section of the country, in one town or another" (*TN* 315). This viciously flat, hard-boiled sentence is part of the aesthetic device of closure Fitzgerald repeatedly referred to in letters about the novel to friends as his "dying fall": his "deliberate choice" in the "avoidance of a dramatic ending" designed "to let [the reader] come to bat for me rather than going out to shake his nerves" (*A Life in Letters* 253, 264). The intent seems to be that of impressing upon the reader the severity of Dick's disastrous idealism and decadence by leaving him utterly and pathetically unredeemed on the levels of both form and content.

<sup>12</sup> Curnutt is particularly thinking here about certain sections of the novel where Nicole becomes the focalizer, and the story is conveyed through stream of consciousness narration or excerpts from love letters written by her to Dick during the period of her clinical institutionalization and shortly thereafter.

Curnutt is not incorrect in this regard, but registering the intervening impulses and desires of the novel's other characters is not the only way Fitzgerald tempers the reader's inclination to criticize his hero. This is also done by preempting such critiques through vivid portrayals of the hero's own obsessive impulse to criticize himself, which is exactly what so many of the playful slippages *out* of third-person omniscience in the opening sections of Book Two are designed to convey. Here is the narrator, for instance, ceding ground to Dick's own misgivings about being elected to one of Yale's elite secret societies during his time at the university:

In some moods he griped at his own reasoning: Could I help it that Pete Livingstone sat in the locker-room Tap Day when everybody looked all over hell for him? And I got an election when otherwise I wouldn't .... He was good and right and I ought to have sat in the locker-room instead. Maybe I would, if I'd thought I had a chance at an election. ... I guess I knew I had a chance all right, all right. But it would have served me right if I'd swallowed my pin in the shower and set up a conflict. (*TN* 117)

Such passages not only attest to the hero's fixation upon the meritocratic bases of his success but also clarify that the novel is structurally designed as a case study of the hero's own discourse of self-criticism. In certain moments of third-person omniscience, Fitzgerald even calls attention to Dick's ongoing project of self-assessment as something about which readers should be aware: "The truth was that for some months he had been going through that partitioning of the things of youth wherein it is decided whether or not to die for what one no longer believes" (*TN* 133). The subtext of this remark is that we as readers are going to witness this "partitioning" play out and need to be able to balance our sympathy for it as a struggle with an ongoing critical capacity to judge the way Dick goes about it. Dick's professional idealism does not literally kill him, but he does ruin himself by refusing to relinquish certain aspects of it that even he recognizes as

disingenuous and self-destructive, like his service-ideal need to be loved. Part of our task as readers is to discern what (Fitzgerald believes) the correct “partitioning” of beliefs and values would have been by discerning how the beliefs and values to which Dick clings lead to his ruin.

We can initially sense that, in Fitzgerald’s view, the commitment to a meritocratic ethos is the part of Dick’s youthful professionalism that should indeed be retained by examining the representation of some of the wealthy, female characters surrounding the protagonist. Nicole Diver, née Warren, for example, is the daughter of a wealthy Chicago industrial magnate, and here is Fitzgerald’s description of her on a typical shopping spree in Paris:

Nicole bought from a great list that ran two pages, and bought things in the windows besides. Everything she liked that she couldn’t possibly use herself, she bought as a present for a friend. She bought colored beads, folding beach cushions, artificial flowers, honey, a guest bed, bags, scarfs, ... [etc.]—bought all of these things not a bit like a high-class courtesan buying underwear and jewels, which were after all professional equipment and insurance—but with an entirely different point of view. Nicole was the product of much ingenuity and toil. For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; ... these were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole, and as the whole system swayed and thundered onward it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying .... (*TN* 55)

Throughout his early life, Fitzgerald struggled as a member of the middle class to live above his means in order both to win girls of the coveted, debutante type he cherished and to travel in the extravagant social circles of heightened culture and feeling he deemed most hospitable to his art. That he had to work for these privileges while others inherited them at birth was an object of lifelong resentment, and this begrudging middle-class

feeling informs the tone of morbid captivation and barely suppressed disgust that frames this telescoped view of American industry feeding the flame of one woman's consumerism. That tone is exactly what one might expect from the writer who once admitted to "an abiding distrust, an animosity, toward the leisure class—not the conviction of a revolutionist but the smouldering [*sic*] hatred of a peasant" (*CU* 77). This barbed, feudal motif is picked up here in the anachronistic metaphor of the "tithe" which anchors this portrait of the nation's imagined community as a labor camp of continental proportions paying in blood, sweat, and tears for the purchases of a Jazz-Age princess living on the Gilded-Age fortune of her industrial tycoon of a father.<sup>13</sup>

The impulsiveness and uselessness of Nicole's purchases earn them the conspicuous if awkwardly phrased demerit of being "not a bit" "professional," which is to say that her feminine leisurely fripperies are an insult to those who work hard for the money they spend and, like the hypothetical "courtesan" to which she is contrasted, spend their money with an eye toward their work. Fitzgerald continues to underscore the contemptibility of Nicole's "unprofessional" leisure by noting its corruptive effects upon Rosemary Hoyt, the impressionable young ingenue whom the Divers have lately befriended and who often accompanies Nicole on her Parisian consumerist benders. Despite the monstrous exorbitance of her spending, "there was grace in the procedure, and presently Rosemary would try to imitate it" (*TN* 55). Being only "from the middle of

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<sup>13</sup> Fitzgerald's ambivalent attitudes toward the rich are one of the most fascinating and challenging aspects of his biography and oeuvre. Generally speaking, Fitzgerald resented class stratification because he wasn't at the top yet treasured it because he wanted to get there and because he subscribed to an Arnoldian idea of a cultural aristocracy. His resentment of the rich was both a corollary to his shame about being a parvenu and a frustration with the fact that the wealthy frequently squandered their potential as the custodians of culture by letting their money become the basis, instead, for philistine dissipation. For a survey of Fitzgerald's relationship to money and class, see Brucoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur* 43, 110, 229-230; Fitzgerald, *A Life in Letters*, 107, 184, 233-234, 302, 352, 372, 462, 471; and Peter L. Hays, "Class Differences in Fitzgerald's Works," 215-223.



the middle class,” Rosemary cannot actually do this because she does not have the capital (TN 53). But not being rich is part of what *endears* her to the third-person narrator who clearly shares the author’s middle-class prejudice against the wealthy and sententiously reminds us, for instance, that unlike Nicole (and however much she might like to imitate her), “Rosemary spent money she had earned” (TN 54). Her recently successful work as an actress has paid for the time she is spending with her mother in Paris and on the Riviera, and the necessity of setting them apart from other expatriates as professionals rather than socialites is apparently important enough for the narrator to offer the weirdly unprompted clarification in the novel’s opening pages that she and her mother arrived in France “not from the necessity of stimulating jaded nerves but with the avidity of prize-winning schoolchildren who *deserved* their vacations” (TN 4, emphasis added).

Rosemary’s mother, Mrs. Elsie Speers, is crucial to an understanding *Tender’s* model of professionalism and the class and gender coordinates it entails. She effectively serves as her daughter’s talent manager and has raised her from the start with a resilience and respect for hard work that would serve as the foundation for her professional success. “By not sparing Rosemary she had made her hard” and “cultivated an idealism” in her daughter “which at present was directed toward herself and saw the world through her eyes” (TN 13). By the time we meet Rosemary at the beginning of the story, she has “a mature distrust of the trivial, the facile and the vulgar” imbibed from her mother’s own diligence and self-discipline, which is why her mother, in turn, is entertaining an idea of which Rosemary is unaware but that the narrator makes clear: “with Rosemary’s sudden success in pictures Mrs. Speers felt that it was time she were spiritually weaned; it would please rather than pain her if this somewhat bouncing, breathless, and exigent idealism

would focus on something except herself" (*TN* 13). Thus, when the Riviera season is over and the Divers invite Rosemary to travel with them to Paris, her mother seizes the opportunity to let the spiritual weaning process begin, being fully aware that her daughter, who had never been in love before, is now deeply in love with both the Divers as a couple and with Dick, in particular:

With the ensuing success and the promise of comparative stability that followed, Mrs. Speers had felt free to tacitly imply tonight:

"You were brought up to work—not especially to marry. Now you've found your first nut to crack and it's a good nut—go ahead and put whatever happens down to experience. Wound yourself or him—whatever happens it can't spoil you because economically you're a boy, not a girl." (*TN* 40)

At the level of content, Mrs. Speers' parenting mirrors Dick Diver's professionalism in the core tenet that "[w]ound[ing]" oneself can be a good thing, that it can make one more, not less whole and that one is indeed only an overgrown child at best until one is exposed to some kind of blow that will cultivate you by chastening you. But Fitzgerald is more upfront here about the very practical economic prerequisites for subscribing to this character-building metaphysics. The professional capacity to "put whatever happens down to experience" obviously depends upon the privilege of having a minimum amount of income to cushion the blows you invite. Mrs. Speers' discourse codes this degree of economic solvency as a gendered matter: if you have it, "'you're a boy, not a girl.'" Rosemary arriving on the Riviera in 1925 thus quite resembles Dick arriving in Zurich in 1917. One is male while the other is female, but at the level of their shared, solidly middle-class professional standing, they are both effectively men.

The fact that Mrs. Speers can only "tacitly imply" all of this further betrays Fitzgerald's enduring male chauvinism at the level of form. The passage's paradoxical

stylistic construction can only be described as a kind of misogynistically fake tagged direct discourse: it reads, that is, as tagged indirect discourse that Fitzgerald has graciously condescended to put in quotation marks. The paternalistic effect is that of a narrator speaking *for* this woman in a way that allows her to *appear* to speak for herself yet ironically shoring up the impression that she needs to be spoken for because she wouldn't, on her own, have had the words to express her ideas. If this reading seems unfairly harsh, one need only look, for further confirmation, to the scene in Book Two when Rosemary's time in Paris imbibing and emulating the Divers' charm and style is over, and Dick must bid her and her mother farewell:

Saying good-by, Dick was aware of Elsie Speers' full charm, aware that she meant rather more to him than merely a last unwillingly relinquished fragment of Rosemary. ... If the cloak, spurs and brilliants in which Rosemary had walked off were things with which he had endowed her, it was nice in contrast to watch her mother's grace knowing that it was surely something he had not evoked. She had an air of seeming to wait as if for a man to get through with something more important than herself, a battle or an operation, during which he must not be hurried or interfered with. When the man finished she would be waiting, without fret or impatience, somewhere on a highstool, turning the pages of a newspaper. (TN 165)

Mrs. Speers' "full charm," in other words, is that as a woman she knows her place, and given the regularity with which Fitzgerald uses his omniscient narrator to guide the reader's interpretive and affective reactions, the shift into free indirect discourse (starting at "She had an air of seeming") is telling in its collapse of the psychic distance otherwise holding Dick's sexist paternalism at bay. The praise accorded to Rosemary's mother for the amenability of her own values and disposition to Dick's patriarchal professionalism is thus just as patriarchal as the stigma accorded to Nicole for her leisure-class jeopardization of it.

Aside from its backhanded sexism, the scene of Mrs. Speers' parting conversation with Dick broaches a crucial topic that enables us to move from the question of gender to that of a larger theme in the novel. Dick maintains with self-conscious modesty that his effect on the love-struck Rosemary has been only minimal, which her mother knows to be untrue:

"This wasn't incidental," Mrs. Speers insisted. "You were the first man—you're an ideal to her. In every letter she says that."

"She's so polite."

"You and Rosemary are the politest people I've ever known, but she means this."

"My politeness is a trick of the heart."

This was partly true. From his father Dick had learned the somewhat conscious good manners of the young Southerner coming north after the Civil War. Often he used them and just as often he despised them because *they were not a protest against how unpleasant selfishness was but against how unpleasant it looked*. (TN 164, emphasis added)

Shelving, for now, the racially significant reference to Dick's Southern father (to which I will later return), the cynical idea that good manners are most often a cosmetic mask for what are at bottom selfish impulses serves as one of the dominant thematic threads in the novel, and the moment here, in which the narrator states it most explicitly, is also noteworthy for pointing out that the protagonist is just as prone to such duplicity as anyone else. As they pertain to Dick, good manners imply the ability to be *charming*, which, trivial as it may seem, is the foundation of his professional work as a psychologist. Dick is in the business of repairing shattered egos, which is what the narrator means by referring, at one point, to "Doctor Diver's profession of sorting the broken shells of another sort of egg" (TN 177). His method for putting the pieces of people back together again is not hypnosis or talking cures but rather his tactful and charismatic skill at massaging people with attention and admiration that makes them feel special. Dick's

success at curing patients, in other words, rests on the same skill set as his success at hosting parties. This seemingly fanciful quality of the protagonist is serious enough for Fitzgerald to use his omniscient narrator to state it early on as unambiguously as possible:

[T]o be included in Dick Diver's world for a while was a remarkable experience: people believed he made special reservations about them, recognizing the proud uniqueness of their destinies, buried under the compromises of how many years. He won everyone quickly with an exquisite consideration and a politeness that moved so fast and intuitively that it could be examined only in its effect. Then, without caution, lest the first bloom of the relation wither, he opened the gate to his amusing world. (TN 27-28)

Dick knows that this aspect of his character is a professional asset, which is why he tells Nicole's sister, Beth "Baby" Warren, that although "[t]here's not much variety in treatment any more ... you try to find the right personality to handle a particular case" (TN 214). If Dick's is the right personality for Nicole's recovery, this is not just because he can make her feel like the only girl in the world and thus charm her back to self-confidence but because his own *need to be loved* ensures that he will do this with an addictive dedication that no other doctor can offer.

Here is Dick "treating" Nicole, for example, before they are even married. She has come to the clinic because of a traumatic history of incest forced upon her by her father when she was young, and Dick's treatment combines a keen sensitivity to the need of protecting her from the advances of men who might exacerbate her traumatic sexual history with a sense of the pleasure derived on his part from being the one needed and loved for this ego-building protection:

[W]hen a stranger stared at her from a nearby table, eyes burning disturbingly like an uncharted light, he turned to the man with an urbane version of intimidation and broke the regard.

"He was just a peeper," he explained cheerfully. "He was just looking at your clothes. Why do you have so many different clothes?"

“Sister says we’re very rich,” she offered humbly. “Since Grandmother is dead.”

“I forgive you.”

He was enough older than Nicole to take pleasure in her youthful vanities and delights .... He delighted in her stretching out her hands to new octaves now that she found herself beautiful and rich. He tried honestly to divorce her from any obsession that he had stitched her together—glad to see her build up happiness and confidence apart from him; the difficulty was that, eventually, Nicole brought everything to his feet, gifts of sacrificial ambrosia, of worshipping myrtle. (TN 137)

There would be no need for the conspicuous adverb “honestly” in the last paragraph if Fitzgerald had not already trained readers to suspect that on some level Dick *enjoys* Nicole’s obsession with the fact that “he had stitched her back together.” The word reads, indeed, less as a genuine move by the narrator to qualify the intensity of Dick’s need to be loved than as a transparent reminder of it by calling attention to the very fact that readers would even *have* to be reassured that Dick’s attempts to quell another’s dependency on him are not half-hearted or disingenuous. The point is not that Dick does not really want Nicole to “build up happiness and confidence apart from him”; he can simultaneously love and want the best for her while loving the feeling of being needed. The problem is that this initially utopian professional setup is ultimately unsustainable. The affects fueling his professionalism are necessarily in conflict with his professional work because his need to be loved and to be of service is stimulated but always eventually defeated by his job as a doctor, which is precisely to help people get to the point where they no longer need him.

The more Nicole improves, the less suppliant and dependent she becomes and the more their marriage modulates from its original conditions as a passionate romance where Dick could also feel desperately needed to a much cooler relation in which Nicole

needs him less as a doctor than as a socialite spouse and her sister Baby stomachs him only as a perpetually available hired hand to care for a sibling whose mental illness Baby does not want to deal with herself. A few years into Dick's marriage, the prestigious bloom of his daring role as doctor and husband all in one begins to flag and backfire: "Naturally Nicole, wanting to own him, wanting him to stand still forever, encouraged any slackness on his part, and in multiplying ways he was constantly inundated by a trickling of goods and money" (*TN* 170). This accusation is largely inconsistent with abundant evidence elsewhere in the novel, especially in Book Three, that Nicole is painfully aware of the career sacrifices Dick has made in marrying her. Though she may harbor toward him a mixture of feelings—including guilt, frustration, fear, pity, and gratitude—malicious possessiveness is not one of them. As Bruccoli notes, however, "Fitzgerald's stock-in-trade was his control over tonal effects," and the line "Naturally Nicole, wanting to own him" is less salient for its truth content than for its capacity to convey Dick's passive-aggressive mood (*Composition* 159). This passive aggressiveness indexes the larger behavior structuring his predicament: Dick is *too good-mannered* to rock the boat. Not least because his ego has long been based on his self-conscious ability to be charming, he will neither openly declare that he expected this marriage to advance rather than impede his professional esteem nor openly charge his wife and sister-in-law with the decadence and exploitation he believes their relation to be forcing upon him. Following the distinction made during his farewell to Mrs. Speers, these good manners are evidence *not* that Dick *isn't* unpleasantly selfish but that he *isn't selfish enough* to let his unpleasantness become apparent, even if it means saving him from his own professional stagnation. All of this will reek of foreshadowing to the readers familiar with

“The Crack-Up.” There is a clear degree to which the character of Dick Diver allowed Fitzgerald to criticize his own hubristic over-ambition to be professionally successful, socially popular, and intimately loved all at once. Like his creator, who had “mortgage[d] [him]self physically and spiritually up to the hilt” until there was “not an ‘I’ any more” on which to organize his self-respect, Dick “had been swallowed up like a gigolo, and somehow permitted his arsenal to be locked up in the Warren safety-deposit vaults,” being too good-mannered and un-self-serving to do anything about it (*CU* 72, 79; *TN* 201).

Throughout the novel, Dick’s resentment at himself and at others over his self-conscious professional dissipation ferments beneath a well-mannered front. The indignity of this situation is brought home to the protagonist as much as to the reader by the transparency with which the good manners of others so barely conceal their own self-serving agendas. When his colleague Franz approaches Dick with the business opportunity of buying and co-owning their own clinic, Baby, “thinking that if Nicole lived beside a clinic she would always feel quite safe about her,” coolly yet sternly advises Dick that he should seriously consider the prospect (*TN* 176). Dick struggles to put his finger on something about this advice that feels distasteful, and it crops up in a mini-epiphany well after the fact “it came to him under the form of what Baby had said: ‘We must think it over carefully—’ and the unsaid lines back of that: ‘We own you, and you’ll admit it sooner or later. It is absurd to keep up the pretense of independence’” (*TN* 177). Because he is gradually destroying himself by suppressing his own needs while catering to those of others (according to Fitzgerald’s logic), the moments in which Dick’s façade of good manners breaks and his more unpleasantly selfish side appears are not



moments where Fitzgerald portrays his protagonist in a negative light but rather quite the opposite: they signify that there is still a pulse somewhere in that enervated professional shell, a will to survive. This faint heartbeat sounds its ugly, smothered thump, for instance, early in Book One when Dick tells Nicole that he wants to ““give a really *bad* party. I mean it. I want to give a party where there’s a brawl and seductions and people going home with their feelings hurt”” (TN 27, original emphasis). At this point, Dick is still ruined lightly enough to be satisfied by sublimating his frustration through a vindictive *schadenfreude* passing under the cover of gregarious emceeing. But toward the end of novel, when his sense of his own decline is most acute, the mask cannot hold its shape, and Nicole, as the visible embodiment of his own depletion, comes in for bad-mannered thrashings.

She went up and putting her arm around his shoulder and touching their heads together said:

“Don’t be sad.”

He looked at her coldly.

“Don’t touch me!” he said.

...

“I didn’t come over here to be disagreeable.”

“Then why *did* you come, Nicole? I can’t do anything for you any more. I’m trying to save myself.”

“From my contamination?”

“Profession throws me into contact with questionable company sometimes.”

She wept with anger at the abuse.

“You’re a coward! You’ve made a failure of your life, and you want to blame it on me.” (TN 301, original emphasis)

Both the author and his protagonist know that Nicole is not entirely wrong. Even in the summer of 1930, when the hell of bracing their marriage against her recent psychiatric collapse was at its freshest, Fitzgerald could admit to Zelda, “We ruined ourselves—I have never honestly thought that we ruined each other” (*Life in Letters* 189). Something

of this self-critical perspective rings through Dick's double-edged comment about his profession. While sneering at the "questionable company" of Nicole's illness, he still tacitly if grudgingly acknowledges that she cannot really be blamed for the kinds of patients his job as a psychologist brings him into contact with, and he conveniently glosses over the fact that nothing in the job description required him to marry her.

This obvious point bears repeating because it clarifies that Dick's decline has nothing to do with the specific profession of psychiatry but everything to do with the subjective work ethic and sense of identity I originally schematized into three parts and have collectively called Dick's professionalism—the affective impulses and moral values that pre-exist his arrival on the scene of his employment, shape how he inhabits the psychiatric profession (e.g., marrying a patient), and also reveal his embeddedness within historically specific frameworks of class, nationality, and gender. *Other* psychiatrists in the novel are not ruined by the profession they share with the protagonist, so Dick's professionalism must make all the difference. When he first meets his colleague Franz, the latter is living peacefully if modestly with a rather homely wife, and though Dick is too good-mannered to say it out loud, "[h]e felt vaguely oppressed ... by the sudden contracting of horizons to which Franz seemed so reconciled" (*TN* 132-133). Fitzgerald crafts his prose to capture Dick's pompous aspirations while maintaining a critical distance from them, switching, for instance, from free indirect discourse in one sentence to third-person omniscience in the next: "The domestic gestures of Franz and his wife as they turned in a cramped space lacked grace and adventure. The post-war months in France, and the lavish liquidations taking place under the aegis of American splendor, had affected Dick's outlook" (*TN* 133).

If the moments where Dick's selfishness breaks through the façade of his good manners register both the progression of his decline and his resistance to it, then the most striking of these occurrences happens in Rome at the end of Book Two, when Rosemary finally breaks off their liaisons and Dick plunges into a downward spiral. The episode brings us to the home stretch in this reading of the novel and brings us as well to the topic of race. Dick runs into Rosemary in Rome while she is there to shoot a movie and hopes that by reprising his relationship with her he can savor just a little more of the immense and even childish need and admiration that Nicole used to give him when she was sick and that Rosemary had briefly given him anew upon their initial encounter. The events in Rome at the end of Book Two take place about four years after Book One's Riviera and Paris sequences in 1925, and Dick knows that Rosemary's view of him is likely to have changed. She turns out to be still infatuated with him, but her sweet nothings are nonetheless foreboding. "I was just a little girl when I met you, Dick. Now I'm a woman" (*TN* 209). The coming fiasco is signaled here as a *déjà vu*, for Dick turns out to have been outgrown again: the same ability to charm another's ego into bloom that first made a wife out of a patient has since made a woman out of a girl, and Rosemary's capacity to attract other men is a product of Dick's own confidence-inspiring handiwork. Her co-star, an Italian actor named Nicotera, has become a competitor for her affections, and when his incessant phone calls keep interrupting one of her trysts with Dick, the latter finally cracks. "[F]rantic with jealousy" because he "didn't want to be hurt again," Dick brands Nicotera "a spic" and spends the rest of his day brooding at various bars (*TN* 218).

This break-up initiates a sequence in which Dick gets drunk, fights with a taxi driver, and is then beaten by the police and mortifyingly rescued from prison by Nicole's sister Baby. While stuck in a holding cell, hungover with one eye swollen shut, Dick experiences a racially coded premonition that clearly anticipates the clean break at the end of "The Crack-Up":

Dick's rage had retreated into him a little and he felt a vast criminal irresponsibility. What had happened to him was so awful that nothing could make any difference unless he could choke it to death, and, as this was unlikely, he was hopeless. He would be a different person henceforward, and in his raw state he had bizarre feelings of what the new self would be. ... No mature Aryan is able to profit by a humiliation; when he forgives it has become part of his life, he has identified himself with the thing which has humiliated him—an upshot that in this case was impossible. (*TN* 233)

In the wake of acute impotence and shame, the idea of race serves to provide Dick with both a corrective ideal and a reassuring fact. The figure of the "mature Aryan" apotheosizes what he has failed to be yet does so while conveniently implying that this apotheosis is nonetheless who he actually is because it is in his blood. Dick knows and has known for some time that he cannot "profit by a humiliation," that the wealth and popularity of a socialite are not sufficient payment for his professional stagnation as the Warren family's private medical gigolo. But by not directly confronting Nicole and Baby about them, he has forgiven his dissipation and exploitation to the point where they have "become part of his life" and "has identified himself with the thing which has humiliated him": the American leisure class.<sup>14</sup> The "Aryan" ideal of Dick's projected clean break

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<sup>14</sup> My focus here is on Dick, but Baby's part in this episode is highly significant in that it continues to iterate the theme of unpleasant selfishness underlying the veneer of good manners and distinguishes this as a specifically American, leisure-class problem. When she gets the news in the middle of the night that Dick is in jail, Baby lives up to her namesake and throws a tantrum at the American Consulate in Rome trying to get an official and a lawyer together to save her brother-in-law from the Italian police and courts. The Consul implores her to be patient, but as the narrator observes in a tone of subdued horror, "This proved of no avail: the American Woman [capitalized here as a type or genus], aroused, stood over him; *the clean-*

invokes an opposing model of character marked by a resilient capacity to endure hardship rooted in a healthy pride that holds the self apart from its embarrassments. By framing this model of character in racial terms, Dick tacitly relies on the explanatory principle of heredity to assure himself that although he has not exhibited these qualities as of late, they are nonetheless at the core of who he *really* is because he is descended from a lineage of people who did. The upshot is that the idea of race enables him to dissociate from his past by allowing him to rationalize it as a time in which he wasn't being himself. The term "Aryan" thus encodes a racially based claim to the dignified traits of not only pride and resilience but also integrity: in being "a different person henceforward," Dick will ostensibly be truer to himself in the future than he has been in the past.

That he has not been true to he who is—or at least to who he was raised to be—is made clear in the short section of the novel dealing with Dick's father, the petite-bourgeois Southern clergyman from whom (if we recall Dick's parting conversation with Mrs. Speers) he inherited his conscious good manners. Dick's father never appears in the novel in-person, but his presence is felt as a loss when Dick receives a telegram while traveling informing him of his father's passing. The brief account of Dick's psychological and emotional reaction to his father's death and burial further elucidates the racial angle behind the place of manners in the novel and their relationship to Dick's professional work ethic and identity. Dick's father serves as another figure in the text through which Fitzgerald iterates the idea that one's character can be ruined by a lack of

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*sweeping irrational temper that had broken the moral back of a race and made a nursery out of a continent, was too much for him*" (TN 232, emphasis added). Fitzgerald prevents his reader from misinterpreting Baby's intercession as a glimmer of genuine selflessness by noting her real motives: "It had been a hard night but she had the satisfaction of feeling that, whatever Dick's previous record was, they now possessed a moral superiority over him for as long as he proved of any use" (TN 235).

adversity: “Dick was born several months after the death of two young sisters and his father, guessing what would be the effect on Dick’s mother, had saved him from a spoiling by becoming his moral guide” (*TN* 203). This guidance function is most clearly encapsulated in the form of a remembered anecdote once told by father to son:

“Once in a strange town when I was first ordained, I went into a crowded room and was confused as to who was my hostess. Several people I knew came toward me, but I disregarded them because I had seen a gray-haired woman sitting by a window far across the room. I went over to her and introduced myself. After that I made many friends in that town.”

His father had done that from a good heart—his father had been sure of what he was, with a deep pride of the two proud widows who had raised him to believe that nothing could be superior to “good instincts,” honor, courtesy, and courage. (*TN* 203-204)

The strength of the impression Fitzgerald wanted Dick’s father to have not just on Dick but on the reader is stylistically signaled by the author’s use of direct discourse rather than indirect speech. Something that this dead man stands for is important enough for him to be given his own voice, and lacking, as this voice does, even a third-person speech tag, it cuts through both historical time and narrative mediation like a knife. The anecdote clarifies the point that good manners have been subject to historical decay: there was a time when they were something other than the mask for unpleasant selfishness they have since become and when they could simply be the outward expression of a truly “good heart.” This stands, of course, in contrast to the perfect storm of fake or half-hearted good manners practiced by characters across the landscape of the story’s present, from Baby, who uses hers to put a pretty face on her designs to own her sister’s husband, to Dick, who uses his to stifle and cushion his professional frustrations by charming people into loving and admiring him at parties or in adulterous trysts with a girl half his age. In the Jazz Age and its aftermath, so the implication goes, manners, decorum, and *savoir-faire*

are well in bloom, but “‘good instincts,’ honor, courtesy, and courage” are hardly at their root, which is why the memory of his late father can only leave Dick guiltily “wishing he had always been as good as he had intended to be” (*TN* 204).

This ideal of “good”-ness is *as* racially marked as the different person Dick is determined to become after his police beating and arrest. Even without explicitly racial terms, the description of Dick’s father as a man of “deep pride” who was “sure of what he was” forecasts the moral motifs of pride and integrity that will echo in the word “Aryan” later in the story. But when Fitzgerald locates the Divers’ hometown and the father’s burial site in the conspicuously Anglo-Saxon, colonial-American epicenter of Chesapeake-Bay area Virginia, even the legacy of Dick’s father becomes an *overtly* racial matter and forecasts, moreover, that third moral motif of racially distinctive resilience that “Aryan” will also come to connote.

Next day at the churchyard his father was laid among a hundred Divers, Dorseys, and Hunters. . . . Dick had no more ties here now and did not believe he would come back. He knelt on the hard soil. These dead, he knew them all, their weather-beaten faces with blue flashing eyes, the spare violent bodies, the souls made of new earth in the forest-heavy darkness of the seventeenth century.

“Good-by, my father—good-by, all my fathers.” (*TN* 205)

The elegiac language and imagery of the colonial frontier reprise the idea running throughout the text that sound and resilient constitutions (“spare violent bodies”) only grow from “hard soil,” which effectively casts Dick’s father’s good manners in turn—and his “‘good instincts,’ honor, courtesy, and courage”—as the august precipitate of a life whose austerity is not elaborately disclosed but is nonetheless intimated in such details as the unexplained fact, mentioned in the previous passage, that the late clergyman was raised by “two proud widows.”

I cannot emphasize enough the following distinction about Fitzgerald's use of race as it pertains to his protagonist: as much as they tend historically and colloquially to connote lineages of privilege, conquest, and domination, Fitzgerald uses the tropes of "Aryan" and Anglo-Saxon descent to signify racial roots in humbling, exacting circumstances that toughen one's mettle. The point of the hypothetical Aryan is how he handles humiliation, and the point of the colonial fathers is how their "weather-beaten faces" attest to their survival in "the forest-heavy darkness" of the settler frontier. Both are good stock not because they are rich and powerful but because they are *not* and because in not being so (to recall the language of Dick's thoughts as a young professional in 1917) they had become more complete from being less intact—had built out their broken sides, after being faintly destroyed, until they were better than the original structure. Writing over histories of African enslavement and native displacement and genocide, this is obviously a highly selective idea of what it means to benefit from an Aryan or Anglo-Saxon inheritance in America. But while I don't mean to defend or excuse Fitzgerald on this account, the narrowness of his racial vision must be understood in the context of its specifically classed contours. The novel's particular constructions of Aryan-ness and Anglo-Saxon-ness are carefully crafted corollaries to its protagonist's not poor but still humble economic origins. Financially speaking, Dick's father, like Dick, married well, but he "always considered that his wife's small fortune belonged to his son, and in college and in medical school sent him a check for all of it four times a year" (*TN* 204). In ascetically declining to partake of his wife's money, he models a self-inflicted sparseness generative of an impressive diligence, stamina, and humility that always inspired his young son: "Watching his father's struggles in poor parishes had wedded a



desire for money to an essentially unacquisitive nature,” had birthed a desire for prosperity not as an end in itself but only as a means to sustain one’s ability to do hard work of great value. (TN 201). The novel’s Aryan and Anglo-Saxon figurations serve the purpose of crystallizing and highlighting this distinctly petite-bourgeois value system and work ethic as the *racial* inheritance bequeathed to Dick by his father(s). Within this discursive logic, the more he is entrenched in the American *leisure* class, the less Aryan/Anglo-Saxon he becomes.

As far as Dick’s professionalism is concerned, then, the visceral conviction that the price of his intactness is incompleteness represents an affective inheritance from the past of a class-specific racial instinct. The other two components of his professional ethos—the morbid need to loved and the desire to be the greatest *x* that ever lived (where the fact that *x* = psychologist is less relevant than the superlative nature of the desire itself)—are affective inheritances from the present, postwar aegis of American splendor that has affected his outlook since childhood. In the palpably American dream of being good and wise and brave and kind and loved, too, if he could fit it in (a dream, we might say, of “being an entire man”) Dick attempts to rationalize the pursuit of the latter two ideals as an expression of fidelity to the first: his endeavor to be the greatest *x* and to be loved while doing it doubles as the challenge that will break him down in order better to build him up. The ironic result, however, is that his attempt to build character by losing intactness turns into the failure of losing character by gaining too much money and leisure. In mapping out the affective contours of a Jazz-Age culture of abundance, Fitzgerald sought to find, through *Tender*, what had been lost over the course of the 1920s in both himself as an individual and in his national generation as a whole (or rather

in his generation of fellow Aryan/Anglo-Saxon, bourgeois to petite-bourgeois, American men): find what had been lost, that is, less in the sense of relocating something one already knows to be missing than of figuring out what exactly has gone missing in the first place so one can determine the next steps for moving forward.

What turns out to have been lost is the capacity for well-measured judgment of one's own strengths and weaknesses, a loss I am arguing Fitzgerald encodes as a matter of national and race decline, a matter of the decay of American character resulting from estrangement from its Anglo-Saxon/Aryan roots. The self-critical ability to gauge one's own merits and demerits accurately has not so much atrophied from disuse as been distorted by the self-aggrandizing effect of wealth and the *disinclination* toward any open and honest assessment of self or others perpetuated by the haute-bourgeois version of good manners. All of this is encapsulated in one of Dick's comments to Baby, just after his frustrating mini-epiphany about the unsaid "We own you" at the back of her aloof encouragement that he buy and co-own a clinic. Reflecting out loud, Dick alleges,

"Good manners are an admission that everybody is so tender that they have to be handled with gloves. Now, human respect—you don't call a man a coward or a liar lightly, but if you spend your life sparing people's feelings and feeding their vanity, you get so you can't distinguish what *should* be respected in them." (TN 178, original emphasis)

This comment is hypocritical of course to some degree, a clear attempt to call Baby a coward and a liar herself but in a way that is still WASPishly good-mannered enough to avoid the ugly scene of singling her out and accusing her directly. The pronouncement's self-critical spirit, however, is unmistakable. Dick knows that it is *his* feelings that have been spared and his vanity that has been fed since his professionally degrading entrance into the leisure-class scene. By now, we can intuit the qualities Fitzgerald believes *should*

be respected by using the images and vocabulary provided over the course of the novel itself, and they are hardly qualities free of bias or bigotry: a healthy, “Aryan” pride in confronting and overcoming one’s humiliations; a humble appreciation for hard work and a resilient constitution for performing it under trying conditions reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon pioneers; and, if you are a woman, the ability to sense when men are tackling matters more important than you and you should just find a paper and a high stool and sit tight.

*Tender* uses the story of Dick Diver and the origins, practice, and corruption of his professionalism to narrate the historical eclipse of these older qualities from a heartier generation by the newer environment of an age when “Americans were getting soft” from excessive liquor, wealth, and leisure (Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz Age” 19). The novel is a belated expression of the conviction Fitzgerald had formed back in 1925 that Jazz-Age America was a “decadent” nation of “brilliant children” “unable to endure or tolerate things-as-they-are” because they had become too accustomed, when faced with unpalatable circumstances, to the privilege of paying for things to be different or paying for enough alcohol and parties not to care (Fitzgerald, *Life in Letters* 130). This intense, usually bitter, self-implicating awareness of the detrimental effects of too much national or economic privilege was already coloring Fitzgerald’s perception and values by the mid-1920s. It only hardened further in the 30s, with Zelda’s illness, the Depression, and debt, and he bore it with him to the very end of his life. “You speak of how good your generation is,” he wrote to his daughter in 1940, a few months before his unexpected

death, “but I think they share with every generation since the Civil War in America the sense of being somehow about to inherit the earth” (*A Life in Letters* 465).<sup>15</sup>

### III. The Weight of the Aegis: How to Kill without Hurting a Hair

One might be inclined to agree with this frank appraisal of American entitlement if the important caveat were added that whoever the members of Fitzgerald’s imagined “generation[s]” were, they were not likely to have been black, Native American, Asian, or Latinx or, for that matter, working-class. The more accurate appraisal would have been that every generation of Americans that was also middle- to upper-class and white has likely shared the sense of being somehow about to inherit the earth and that some, moreover, have been more conscious of this *as* a sensation and as a *problem* than others. The point here is not to shame Fitzgerald for this oversight from the moral high ground of our historical hindsight but to recognize, in his writing, an earnest effort at humbling self-

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<sup>15</sup> In an extended, revised version of this chapter, this second section would conclude with a discussion of the way Fitzgerald’s professionalism-coded thoughts about his own work ethic and decadent decline are also informed by his ideas about “American” identity. Throughout his essays, especially, Fitzgerald created a strong link between his personal career and biography in the 1920s and 1930s and the cultural and economic trajectory of the United States during the Roaring 20s and the Depression. He turned his own story, in other words, into an allegorical narrative, one in which his (and Zelda’s) extravagant behavior in 20s planted the seeds for his eventual ruin the following decade, just as the economic downturn of the Depression inevitably followed from profligate leisure of the Jazz Age, what Fitzgerald called “the most expensive orgy in history,” “[a] whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure,” living on “borrowed time” (“Echoes” 21, 15, 21). The connection between Americanness and what I have been describing as Dick’s implicitly racialized professionalism has been mentioned in passing at various points throughout this chapter, from the line on page 38 about the “aegis of American splendor” having “affected Dick’s outlook” to the one on page 26 about his “illusions of eternal health and strength” planted by “the lies of generations of frontier mothers who had to croon falsely, that there were no wolves outside the cabin door” to the footnote on page 40 noting the way Fitzgerald’s Baby Warren’s selfish and child-like temper as a trait typical of “the American Woman” (*TN* 133, 117, 232). The textual evidence of the Americanness of Dick’s professionalism and Fitzgerald’s emphasis on Americanness as a theme are thus already woven throughout the chapter, and a revised version would simply take a moment to reflect on this in a more focused way. I think the major point here would be that the whiteness I am detailing through Dick’s professionalism is also a very nationally-specific form of whiteness, one tied to a typically “American” sense of the boundless of one’s own potential, of what one can aspire to be, of which Fitzgerald, particularly in his 1930s writings, was ruefully critical as an egotistical and self-destructive quality.

criticism that unfortunately accommodates persisting forms of gendered racial and class bias.

A recognition of that sort is precisely what I have tried to accomplish in the reading of *Tender* offered above. The origins, contours, and ramifications of Dick Diver's professionalism bring into relief its ability to embody a particular manifestation of whiteness, one that exhibits as its defining feature neither overt racism against people of color *nor* oblivious unawareness of one's material privileges and opportunities but rather a compulsive need to prove that one has earned the social and economic standing one enjoys and lived one's life in a way that accords with seemingly universal ideals of moral uprightness and social accountability. This anxious form of middle-class whiteness is distinguished by genuine yet flawed efforts at self-criticism, by an impulse to take stock of the social and economic privileges one has had the good fortune to inherit and apologize for them on the grounds that a) they have not disposed one to a cushy life without struggle and b) whatever successes one has achieved are not just inevitable derivations of the racially, economically, nationally, and/or sexually hospitable circumstances of one's birth and upbringing but products of integrity and hard work. Whiteness, in this formulation, connotes a set of moral and affective dispositions centered around a self-conscious fixation over the potential culpability of how one has come into certain coveted positions like material comfort or occupational prestige and how one has used and appreciated these benefits (or squandered them and taken them for granted).

To speak of a "self-critical whiteness" by the standards of our own contemporary moment would likely imply speaking about white people who are self-critical *about* their own whiteness, who reflect on the ways in which their racial identity has accorded them

various privileges and opportunities and who reflect on this topic in effort to *dismantle* the societal structures that have made this possible. Obviously, that is not quite what we are getting from Fitzgerald's protagonist. Dick's anxious self-criticism clings to rather than criticizes his white racial background: "No mature Aryan is able to profit by a humiliation." When I say that Fitzgerald's novel illustrates a form of self-critical whiteness that can help us think about white racial identity and the dynamics of white supremacy in our contemporary moment, I mean that his protagonist models a form of self-criticism that begins to interrogate whether one has earned the social and economic advantages one enjoys only to end up, down the line, rationalizing and apologizing for one's privileged social positioning, particularly by recourse to ideas and logics that ultimately work to reinforce the status quo, such as the language of meritocracy or the idea that social and economic elites do the work they do out of a selfless desire to be of service others.

Fitzgerald critics have long been attentive to the place and function of race in his fiction, but this reading of race in *Tender* departs drastically from their usual approaches. One branch of scholarship focuses on Fitzgerald's fiction from the 1920s, especially *The Great Gatsby*, in order to reveal the ways in which the racial logics and prejudices unique to American nativism during that decade manifest within his texts (Michaels 17-29; Clymer). Other critics note that the self-conscious construction and management of identity via social theatricality and conspicuous consumption is a consistent theme in Fitzgerald's work and have used this as the basis for claims about the performativity and instability of race, coded in his fiction as a liberating or a dangerous quality (or both) (Goldsmith; Keller). But despite a variety of specific arguments and methods, the general

tendency of racially oriented Fitzgerald criticism has almost always been to isolate and expound upon stereotypical characters, plot devices, or figurative tropes that exemplify the degree to which, in one way or another, he shared in and perpetuated the racist biases and anxieties of his own historical moment. The major studies of *Tender*'s racial semiotics are no exception in this regard. They tend to focus on one or more of three specific characters in the novel and the brief episodes with which they are associated—characters and episodes that I have deliberately avoided discussing until now.

The first of these involves Abe North, an American musician and friend of the Divers vacationing with them in France who has become resigned to a life of parties and drinking and lost his resolve to return to America and continue his career. At the end of Book One, Abe arrives at Dick's Paris hotel with "a small, respectable Negro" from Sweden named Jules Peterson whom he has just befriended and endangered in an "alcoholic fog" in Montparnasse (*TN* 106). A drunken Abe, clearly unable to keep track of his money, had improperly accused an African American bar patron of stealing his cash and had placed charges with the police to which Peterson "had been a legal witness" (*TN* 106). While the identity and guilt of the accused party was still in question, the police further complicated the situation by arresting a second African American tourist as a suspect, until "[t]he true culprit," a third African American man, eventually reappeared with the alibi "that he had merely commandeered a fifty-franc note to pay for drinks that Abe had ordered" (*TN* 106). In a furious vengeance one can only assume Fitzgerald intended as a primitivizing mark of irrational Negroid passion, the three black Americans implicated by Abe's indiscretion "were not so much after Abe as after Peterson," whom the narrator describes as "rather in the position of the friendly Indian who had helped a

white” by serving as Abe’s legal witness in the police charges (*TN* 106). When Abe and Dick momentarily leave Peterson alone in a hotel room, they return to find his murdered corpse splayed out on the bed, the three African Americans having tracked him to the hotel where he and Abe had gone to seek advice and shelter from Dick.

The other two characters exemplify Fitzgerald’s flirtations with Orientalism. Abe soon meets a disgraced and fitting end being beaten to death in a speakeasy, and his widow Mary North remarries to an Italian count, the “ruler-owner of manganese deposits in southwestern Asia” (*TN* 258). “‘Conte di Minghetti’ was merely a papal title,” we are told, stemming from the man’s wealth (*TN* 258). The real name of Mary’s new husband is Hosain, and he is not Italian but rather “of the Kyble-Berber-Sabaeen-Hindu strain that belts across north Africa and Asia, more sympathetic to the European than the mongrel faces of the ports” yet “not quite light enough to travel in a pullman south of the Mason-Dixon” (*TN* 259, 258). This Orientalist figure—or, specifically, his interracial marriage to Mary—is the second feature of the novel foregrounded by critics discussing race, and the third feature also pertains to another interracial pairing. Toward the end of Book Three, as Dick’s professional, romantic, and social capacities decline, Nicole’s disaffection with him is matched by her frequent and intense flirtations with a French-American soldier Tommy Barban. Each time he appears on the scene, Fitzgerald codes Tommy’s romantic and sexual allure in racially darkening terms. Traveling and fighting wars in distant lands has left him “dark, scarred and handsome,” and Nicole is erotically thrilled by the coloring of his complexion “by unknown suns, his nourishment by strange soils, [and] his tongue awkward with the curl of many dialects” (*TN* 294, 269). Nicole gradually builds up the ego and confidence to break from Dick and plunge into a romance with Tommy



invigorated by a sense of danger and spontaneity based on his darkened, vaguely foreign racial profile. The language and imagery used to describe their trysts assume an explicitly exoticizing and Orientalist cast: “it was all as new as they were to each other.

Symbolically she lay across his saddle-bow as surely as he had wolfed her away from Damascus and they had come out upon the Mongolian plain. Moment by moment all that Dick had taught her [control, reserve, dispassion] fell away .... Tangled with love in the moonlight she welcomed the anarchy of her lover” (*TN* 297-298).

These are the types of scenes and characters centralized by the most influential criticism on race in *Tender*, their value of course being their capacity to evidence and clarify Fitzgerald’s racist inclinations and world views. Felipe Smith traces Fitzgerald’s use of racist tropes and characters to misgivings about the Jazz Age’s decadent moral climate, “its indulgence of new and corrupting forms of sexuality by previously suppressed social forces—blacks, lesbians, heterosexual women—all in revolt against social propriety” (“The Figure on the Bed” 195). For Smith, the plot device of Peterson’s murder signifies a reactionary phobia about the breakdown of social distinction and hierarchy, what Smith calls Fitzgerald’s deep-seated anxiety over “the encroachment of all forms of ‘difference’ into the preserve of white male privilege” (“The Figure” 208). The important aspect of Peterson’s death at the hands of “‘rioting’ black American expatriates” in this reading is “the fact that Dick is incapable of preventing their invasion of his exclusive world” (Smith, “The Figure” 208). Chris Messenger adopts a similar approach in his reading of *Tender*, focusing especially on the novel’s interracial romances—Nicole and Tommy, Rosemary and Nicotera, Mary and Hosain—which he reads as evidence of Fitzgerald’s insecurity, as an Anglo-Saxon male, over “the

Hollywood of ‘dark men’ such as Rudolph Valentino” that gained eroticized popularity among white women during his time (161). Dick’s decline, Messenger writes, “is punctuated by repeated unstable boundary constructions of race and ethnicity in which Fitzgerald works through racial anxieties in a continuing dialogue on whiteness and darker males” (160).<sup>16</sup>

The general thrust behind such readings of race in Fitzgerald’s fiction is thus to trace the significance of all racial signifiers to the wellspring of his more or less open identification with and rearguard defense of patriarchal white supremacy. As Smith aptly observes,

Because he was so concerned about the loss of the genteel America which had engendered his fantasies of social conquest, because all his hopes for the realization of that dream depended upon America remaining the America of his youth (its elitist social structure making that conquest all the more impressive) Fitzgerald was troubled by trends which blurred the old lines of social distinction. (Smith, *The Dark Side of Paradise* 21)

In this light, the conflict between Fitzgerald’s desire for upward mobility and his disdain for the idea of being a parvenu climber created a persistent inferiority complex that stands

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<sup>16</sup> Peterson is killed in Rosemary’s hotel room, and Smith notes that the placement of his black corpse in the bed of Dick’s white lover ominously foreshadows the rising tide of white-woman/dark-man pairings that will eclipse the protagonist by the end of the novel, further illustrating the anxious, reactionary vision of an apocalyptic breakdown of moral and social order underlying Fitzgerald’s narrative (209). Messenger argues that in contrast to the gentle, chaste, scripted romances Dick maintains with Rosemary and Nicole, Fitzgerald acknowledges the desirability of the more passionate, uninhibited forms of sex and romance represented by darker, more potent male lovers like Tommy and even uses such fictional characters to play out sexual fantasies (“Fitzgerald [is] liberated through Tommy to ‘do’ darker sexuality” [166]). Messenger’s take on the figure of Peterson works to point out the *limits* of Fitzgerald’s already limited racial openness: if he is albeit ambivalently “captivated by Hollywood conceptions of darker (white) males,” he has nothing but *unthreatened* contempt for black Americans and Europeans, and it shows in Fitzgerald’s representation of the murder episode, which Dick reassures Rosemary is “‘only some nigger scrap’” (Messenger 160; *TN* 110). Lacking any “history or family in the text,” Fitzgerald’s black characters are denied any “fundamental humanity ... that might elicit a sympathetic relation to their story,” and Peterson is just an occasion for the Anglo-Saxon hero to swing into action and protect Rosemary from embroilment in a disgraceful situation, “an accessory,” in Messenger’s words, “to Fitzgerald’s needs to keep the white heroine inviolate, nothing more” (169, 170, 171).

at the root of his recourse to racist tropes and logics.<sup>17</sup> The task of the critic becomes that of showing, through Fitzgerald's fiction, how "he adopted hostility toward otherness in compensation for his own economic, class and ethnic insecurities," precisely what Smith and Messenger do by reading the Peterson murder and the novel's white-woman/dark-man couplings as signals of Fitzgerald's anxiety over the precarious state of patriarchal white supremacy (Smith, *The Dark Side* 14).

In *F. Scott Fitzgerald's Racial Angles and the Business of Literary Greatness*, Michael Nowlin proffers one of the few treatments of race in Fitzgerald's oeuvre that does not operate, primarily at least, in the vein of exposing the author's reactionary phobias about the breakdown of patriarchal and white-supremacist social hierarchies in the wake of Jazz-Age decadence. Nowlin's study is also of particular interest here as the only work to date that collates issues of race and professionalism within Fitzgerald criticism. Nowlin astutely characterizes Fitzgerald's professionalism in terms of an ambivalent commitment to two different, polarizing aspects of his career as a literary artist: on the one hand, a highbrow, "modernist" aspiration to the prestige and symbolic capital accruing from postures of disinterested, autonomous aesthetic production; on the other hand, the mundane, lowbrow reality of the economic survival and commercial success to be gained by working in the artistic mediums and forms of mass entertainment (such as film or magazine fiction) and catering to the tastes and trends of popular culture

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<sup>17</sup> This racialized inferiority complex was the subject of a 1933 letter Fitzgerald wrote to friend and fellow writer John O'Hara. "I am half black Irish," he wrote, "and half old American stock," but "[t]he black Irish half of the family had the money and looked down upon the Maryland side ... who had, and really had, that certain series of reticences and obligations that go under the poor old shattered word 'breeding' (modern form 'inhibitions')" (*A Life in Letters* 233). This produced "a two cylinder inferiority complex," he avowed, "[s]o if I were elected King of Scotland tomorrow after graduating from Eton, Magdalene to the Guards with an embryonic history which tied me to the Plantagonets, I would still be a parvenue. I spent my youth in alternately crawling in front of the kitchen maids and insulting the great" (*Ibid.*).

(Nowlin 1-9). Nowlin argues that Fitzgerald worked through this tension in his fiction by coding its respective halves in racial terms. He coded “his ‘higher’ aspirations—after artistic purity and literary immortality—in terms of a transcendental ‘whiteness’” (Nowlin 12). But he also used a variety of characters and tropes evocative of “a figurative ‘blackness’” “to represent his enmeshment—by both desire and economic necessity—in the entertainment business and America’s mass culture of celebrity,” his “imaginative affiliation with a feminized, black and immigrant America” that served as both the lifeblood and the exploited labor pool of the nation’s vibrant popular culture (Nowlin 11, 14).

Nowlin carefully notes that this binary racial symbolism is hardly stark or simplistic. For there is also a version of whiteness associated not with commercially unsullied artistic purity but with the philistinism and materialism of the nation’s upper class—the “corrupt, compromised ‘rich man’s club’” from which Fitzgerald’s high-cultural idea of whiteness as aesthetic autonomy was *as* distant as the black, female, and immigrant masses of popular entertainment (Nowlin 13). Hence, the problem with the dyad of “the pure white artist and compromised black entertainer” for Fitzgerald is precisely that these two personas “always threaten to collapse into one another inasmuch as both express a will to overreach, distinguish themselves from, and enact a rivalrous vengeance upon a dominant, waspish, bourgeois, patriarchal social subject that nonetheless exerted a powerful, lifelong attraction for him” (Nowlin 13). Ultimately, Nowlin argues that Fitzgerald managed this self-conflicting tension “through a formal irony proper to aesthetic disinterestedness,” through irony, that is, as a mode of expressing his identification with “the (black) entertainer’s aspiration to cultural and

social equality” in a way that still allows him to disavow that blackness as abject *while* displaying, in the very use of that irony, a modernist formal sophistication testifying to cultural distinction nobler than the sheer economic distinction of being rich—what Nowlin calls an “elite whiteness that is whiter than white” (14). Nowlin thus provides a very nuanced interpretive framework for reading the presence of black characters and tropes in Fitzgerald’s work as something other than just symbols of a reactionary paranoia over the modern breakdown of genteel, traditional social orders. But the arc of his argument about the racialized, middle-class, aspirational elitism undergirding Fitzgerald’s literary production still points, of course, to the bottom line of Fitzgerald’s latent white supremacism: the anti-blackness, however ambivalent, that informs his artistic self-image.

Criticism like that of Smith, Messenger, and Nowlin has proven invaluable to shedding light on the racial dynamics of Fitzgerald’s work and the rootedness of both his fiction and his personal prejudices within historically and nationally specific contexts. I want to reiterate that in departing from their precedents for reading race in Fitzgerald’s texts, I am not questioning the accuracy or importance of their contentions but rather offering another approach that builds upon the criticism that has come before and fills in some of its gaps. The issue here is not that discussions of race in Fitzgerald’s work have completely overlooked the question of whiteness in favor of frameworks that only see race at work in the appearance of nonwhite characters. This is obviously not the case in Nowlin’s excellent study, for one, given that half of his attention is devoted to the place of whiteness in Fitzgerald’s professionalism, and Susan L. Keller, to take another example, has attended to the matter of race specifically as it pertains to white characters

in the novel in her analysis of tanning as a form of racialized “consumer self-fashioning” among leisure-class expatriates of Fitzgerald’s time (Keller 149).<sup>18</sup> I am taking issue not with a critical inattention to the status of whiteness but with a critical compulsion to affix the significance of all manifestations of race—whether in whiteness, blackness, or discourses of Orientalism—to the foundational fact of an underlying reactionary *racism* (even Keller’s analysis of white characters’ racial self-fashioning via tanning also ends up at this point).<sup>19</sup> Fitzgerald’s inclination to defend and glorify Anglo-Saxons or Aryans while stigmatizing black people, Asians, and other darker races *is* a fact, but it is not the *only* fact of racial relevance. Inequality depends upon concrete and ideological mechanisms that both keep certain groups down *and* buoy others up. In the hyper-vigilance with which critics have elucidated the means and terms by which Fitzgerald renders racialized Others inferior, they have missed the complementary discourse by which he not only renders his own racialized self as superior but, even more than that, registers the self-destructive effects of the very superlative standards to which he holds

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<sup>18</sup> In the opening scenes of *Tender*, Fitzgerald distinguishes the Divers and their coterie from other beachgoers on the Riviera by their tans, which, Keller explains, were “supposed to make known one’s class status and to display one’s conspicuous consumption of leisure time” (139). She adds (echoing Messenger’s comments on Fitzgerald’s vicarious relation to the figure of Tommy Barban as an erotic sheikh), that “[t]anning affords white characters like Nicole and [Dick] a way safely to ‘try on’ a darker sexuality, to ‘do’ sensuality” (144).

<sup>19</sup> The liberty of consumer self-construction through tanning, Keller notes, “comes at a cost—the blurring of clear-cut racial distinctions and the loss of white supremacy” (144). What tanning finally signifies as a self-racializing practice of conspicuous leisure and consumption is capitalist modernity’s *disruption* of “older racial hierarchies” in which outward appearance could be depended on to indicate “essential qualities of identity”; when one can pay for products and leisure time that modify one’s appearance, a particularly fashionable, culturally celebrated skin complexion “turns out to be a symbol of purchasing power, not intrinsic worth” (131, 140). For Keller, too, then, it is some form anxiety about the breakdown of a racially stratified and conservative social order that underwrites Fitzgerald’s vision. Thus, she describes *Tender* as “haunted” by “the proliferation of equivocal racial figures whose exceptional wealth promises them entry into cosmopolitan society despite their dark skin,” her case in point being Mary’s husband Hosain (Keller 152). After reminding us that one of the few details we get about Jules Peterson is that he is a small manufacturer of shoe polish—a product that alludes “to the burnt cork of blackface minstrelsy”—Keller argues that by “killing [him] off,” Fitzgerald “attempts to repress the crisis that occurs when the biological model of racial hierarchies collides with the capitalist model of creating identity through consumption” (151).

himself (the service ideal) and even attempts self-chastising corrections that unfortunately re-accommodate a logic of righteous self-aggrandizement (the meritocratic ideal). This is the discourse of middle-class whiteness as professionalism I have sought to illuminate: whiteness as a self-conscious moral and affective compulsion to be critical yet apologetic about one's racially marked position of social and economic privilege and the values and strategies for social self-presentation that allow one to walk that tightrope of self-critique-qua-self-exoneration.

Few things serve as such instinctive evidence of the quality and exceptionality of one's character than narratives about the work one does for a living and how and why one does it, which is why the idea of professionalism—as a kind of ideologically charged, identity-grounding work ethic—proves so germane to the analysis of whiteness in this sense. This has become even more true under the economic and cultural conditions of neoliberalism, where the language and logics of meritocracy are increasingly used as a colorblind explanation for inequality and where work itself, moreover, is becoming ever more central to people's sense of their own identities. In *Work's Intimacy*, for instance, Melissa Gregg elucidates “the increasingly intimate relationship salaried professionals have with their work” (2). In line with a neoliberal value system that emphasizes entrepreneurial individualism (and maximizes profit by cutting costs related to management and oversight), many corporate environments today extract more labor from their employees by making them responsible for overseeing their own productivity and discipline. Professionals are increasingly pressured to be “self-motivating agents,” workers who can be “relied upon ‘to control themselves’” (M. Gregg 13). Such pressures overlap with increasingly long workdays, new technologies that allow people work from

home, and greater engagement in networking and forms of social media that require people to instrumentalize their personality and social relationships for work. All of this contributes to what Gregg calls the “*presence bleed*” of work culture, “where firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply” (M. Gregg 2, original emphasis). “There is now a significant number of people for whom paid employment is the most compelling demonstration of virtue, accomplishment, and self-identity that society makes available” (M. Gregg xi).<sup>20</sup>

The increasing tendency of white-collar professionals to base their sense of identity and self-regard around their work is understandable yet also somewhat concerning given the wealth of scholarship suggesting that the professions and professionalism have historically been and continue to be hot beds of inequality, bastions of white male privilege that place disproportionate burdens on women and people of color as they access and navigate these spaces. Corinne Castro, for instance, has shown how the institutional and economic conditions that structure academia continue to create obstacles for aspiring or practicing academics of color (*Women of Color*). Karen Ho has

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<sup>20</sup> For a further discussion of the increasingly role of meritocratic ideology in contemporary workplaces and modern forms of capitalism, see Richard Sennett’s *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. For another account of the increasing breakdown between personal and professional identities under modern forms of work discipline, see Peter Fleming, who details a new management ethos “in which *personal authenticity* is the primary refrain in a growing number of corporations” (viii, original emphasis). Fleming outlines a new form of control in corporate management culture that takes a more “laissez-faire approach to norms” (21). Employees are actually encouraged to express their “playful and fun nature” and even engage in light forms of counter-cultural, anti-capitalist expression, so long as these expressions are only “aesthetic”: confined to “a ‘gesture’ or ‘style’ that individuates rather than collectivizes” the employee’s rebellious critique of the system (Fleming 21, 81, 91). This ethos of personal authenticity functions as a form of worker self-discipline because it distracts from other forms of inequality and control, “emphasizing a particular kind of freedom [in the work place], which pertains to identity and expression of self rather than, say, job discretion or participation in decision-making” (Fleming 33). Similar to what Gregg calls the “presence bleed” of work culture into personal life, Fleming notes that the personal-authenticity approach to management increasingly capitalizes on “those aspects of the self that are more associative of the private or non-work realm,” including things like “signs of leisure, sexuality, ethnicity, alternative lifestyles, and [personal] consumption patterns,” all of which are newly “welcomed into the sphere of production” (7).



made similar observations about the way Wall Street investment banking firms structure their promotional ladders and allocate various kinds of differently remunerated work, Women of color in these firms put in more hours for fewer rewards in a field that claims to be meritocratically structured on pure, individual performance (Ho 73-121). Other scholars have shown how, in addition to the demands of their work, professionals of color frequently deal with the additional strain of balancing their upward economic mobility with commitment to activist work on behalf of the working-class communities from which they may have come and which remain politically and economically marginalized (Rentería; Powers, Oriol, and Jain). Daniel Rosenblatt's Bourdieu-based analysis of the contemporary professional-managerial class reveals the enduring whiteness of this demographic by examining the consumer tastes of its members (613-615). In focusing specifically on the *affective* dimensions of professional identity, this chapter's critique of professionalism is perhaps closest in approach to that of literary critic David Trotter, who argues that paranoia is a signature component of professionalization, as professional writers (male ones especially) often feared that their specialized expertise might go insufficiently recognized and valued by the public.<sup>21</sup> The idea of professionalism as a state of paranoia is quite germane to this chapter's reading of Fitzgerald, except that where, for Trotter, the professional is paranoid about the public recognition and valuation of his expertise, I am suggesting a sort of professional paranoia about the moral innocence or culpability of the means and comportment by which a position of socioeconomic prestige is acquired and inhabited.

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<sup>21</sup> Trotter reads the impulse toward abstraction and other non-mimetic aesthetic forms by turn-of-the-century English male modernists as indicative of a need to distinguish the elite uniqueness of their artistry and display their aesthetic expertise at creating order out of the messiness of their representational objects.

Admittedly, paranoia is in fact too specific and intricate a term for my own purposes, but Fitzgerald's epistolary record clearly shows that his literary production was always undergirded by some form of distressed self-consciousness on these matters. A few years after the publication of *Tender* and just months after that of "The Crack-Up," he wrote to fellow writer John O'Hara,

Again and again in my books I have tried to imagine my regret that I have never been as good as I intended to be (and you must know that what I mean by good is the modern don't-hurt-a-hair-of-anybody's-head-and-kill-a-hundred-thousand-people-if-necessary—in other words a personal conscience and meaning by personal conscience yourself stripped in white midnight before your own God). (*Life in Letters* 303)

What I mean by liberal, middle-class whiteness as a self-critical yet self-apologetic obsession with the moral culpability of one's own social prestige and economic prosperity is captured, I suggest, by this massively hyphenated gloss on what Fitzgerald means by being "good": "kill-a-hundred-thousand-people-if-necessary"—do whatever it takes to get to the top in this world, to prosper in it—but "don't-hurt-a-hair-of-anybody's-head"—do it in a way where you can say that no blood, sweat, or tears were spilt but your own, one that allows your acquisition of success to dovetail with the acquisition of love and social approval.<sup>22</sup> The idealistic reconciliation of these two imperatives (indeed, the idealization that these two imperatives *are* reconcilable) constitutes a Fitzgeraldian expression of what Ta-Nehisi Coates, writing to his son in *Between the World and Me*, calls "the Dream": the Dream of "perfect houses and nice lawns," of "Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways," of being a good person with nice things in

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<sup>22</sup> The caveat here of course is that in 1936 Fitzgerald was hardly enjoying prestige or prosperity as a novelist, what with the Depression, his wife's condition, and the slump in artistic productivity these circumstances had long been engendering. But the point about this ideal goodness is that it *is* an ideal. It is not what Fitzgerald thought himself actually to be in 1936 but the moral standard he had held throughout much of his adult life long before and up to that point, regardless of his self-judged failure to have attained it.

an ethically untroubled world (11). In reality, Coates reminds his son, that Dream only “persists by warring with the known world,” and it “rests on our backs,” black backs, immigrant backs, working-class backs, all kinds of backs, in the present and in the past, except those of the Dreamers themselves, who, by the very nature of their Dream (in which perfect houses can and must be had with perfect innocence) have to believe that the only backs on which the Dream rests (Coates, *Between* 11). This is the key to the Dreamers being able to “think that they are white,” as Coates puts it in the epigraph to this chapter: appealing to the work they have done to pay for the Dream—the *careers* they have established—as an alibi for having not, as individuals, hurt-a-hair-on-anybody’s-head (Coates, *Between* 146). This obscures the fact that, systemically and institutionally, the Dream’s history and scale has always been and continues to be that of the kill-a-hundred-thousand-people-if-necessary type.

Yet the image of “yourself stripped in white midnight before your own God,” captures another aspect of the Dream, another dimension of it, that is difficult to talk about because even the slightest attempt to acknowledge it can resemble and be misconstrued as an attempt to pity and defend the Dreamers’ need to believe themselves to be white. If the Dream exists, as Coates makes clear, only by warring with reality, then the same must be true of the Dreamers, who must constantly sharpen, repair, and retool their ideological narratives in the fight to maintain their ego-ideal as good white people and submit to the kind of chronic, internal self-tribunal imagined in Fitzgerald’s “white midnight” of existential flagellation. *Tender is the Night* and “The Crack-Up,” each in their own way, exhibit Fitzgerald confronting his own status as a Dreamer and the damage, specifically, that his Dreaming has wrought on his capacity to pursue fulfilling

work, healthy relationships, and honest self-assessment. But these texts also exhibit him grasping for ideas and narratives with some sort of redemptive value, something to take the edge off his self-critique and recuperate both Dick and his own misanthropic persona as a writer only as dignified figures martyred to their own professional ideals of impossible goodness. If these two texts contribute anything toward a vision of the “white race”—or a liberal, middle-class segment of it—they remind us that this racial group only exists by a slight variation on the same principle by which the black race can be said to exist for Coates:

“Make the race proud,” the elders used to say. But by then I knew that I wasn’t so much bound to a biological ‘race’ as to a group of people, and these people were not black because of any uniform color or any uniform physical feature. They were bound because they suffered under the weight of the Dream, and they were bound by all the beautiful things, all the language and mannerisms, all the food and music, all the literature and philosophy, all the common language that they fashioned like diamonds under the weight of the Dream. (Coates, *Between the World and Me* 119)

The people who believe themselves to be white, on the other hand, are bound together, no doubt, because they are buoyed up by the Dream rather than crushed by it. I am suggesting, however, that they are also bound by their own form of strain ironically incurred not under “the weight of the Dream” but under its aegis—a strain incomparably less severe, of course, than the suffering endured by people of color. The white Dreamers are bound by “the language and mannerisms” fashioned like armor under the pressure of the Dream’s moral defense, bound by the common injunction to constant self-exculpation framed as self-criticism, by all the rationales and rhetoric invoked to testify to their don’t-hurt-a-hair-on-anybody’s-head goodness and advertise the meritocratic bases of their success and the social contributions of their work.

It should thus be both highly unsurprising and highly alarming when the course of elite or at least middle-class white auto-critique ends up in a meritocratic place—and highly frustrating, too, as one wants to acknowledge and encourage the impulse to take oneself and one’s privilege to task as such yet must ultimately criticize it where it eventually assumes a self-apologetic form. Perhaps this is why Fitzgerald’s private correspondence from the late-30s until his death can be, by turns, both incredibly poignant and incredibly off-putting. Nothing characterizes it so much as the mixture of offensive sanctimoniousness and exasperated desperation with which he invokes the language of meritocracy left and right, as if it were the primary takeaway—the last basis for self-respect—yielded by the self-exploratory writings like *Tender* and “The Crack-Up” which occupied him in the early and middle parts of the decade. Particularly illustrative here are his letters to his daughter Scottie, whom he feared would repeat the decadent behavior that ruined himself and Zelda in the 20s if she didn’t apply herself to her studies. “In your career as a ‘wild society girl,’ vintage of 1925, I’m not interested,” he warned Scottie as she was finishing high school, verging on college, and spending more time on boys, parties, and the like (*Life in Letters* 365). What concerned him, above all, was having her internalize the idea that a Dick-Diver-like charm and popularity in social circles is a cheap substitute for real achievement. “[Y]ou’re going on blind faith,” he warned, “when you assume that a small gift for people will get you through the world” (*Life in Letters* 346). On another occasion, when Scottie’s social conduct led to some mild self-embarrassment, he repeated the admonition again: “If you did not have a charm and companionability, such a blow might have chastened you, but ... you will always be able to find companions who will reassure you of your importance even though your

accomplishment is a goose-egg” (*Letters* 364). Fitzgerald clearly felt it his parental duty to counter such misguiding reassurance and had no problem resorting to an almost cruel kind of shaming if such cushioned warnings did not take. “She never knew how to use her energy,” he reminded Scottie about her mother Zelda, “she’s passed that failing on to you” (*Letters* 363). When Fitzgerald bore down on Scottie for unsatisfactory performances in school, the language of his fatherly censure palpably reprised the paternalistic professionalism that grounded his frustrations with his wife: “I never wanted to see again in this world women who were brought up as idlers .... There is not enough energy, or call it money, to carry anyone who is dead weight and I am angry and resentful in my soul when I feel that I am doing this” (*Letters* 363).

Fitzgerald’s recourse to these meritocratic exhortations bespeak his *uneasiness* about the manner in which Scottie, to his mind, was inhabiting and squandering the social and economic opportunities his struggling professional work afforded her, particularly insofar as it resembled the Jazz-Age behavior he concluded had been his own ruin. He expressed this uneasiness to his daughter by pontificating the meritocratic gospel in a combined display of sententious hauteur and genuine, loving parental concern. He was trying to enjoin her at an early age to the kind of self-conscious humility and vigilant awareness of one’s own limitations and weaknesses he felt he himself had lost in the 20s (as fictionalized in *Tender*)—trying to spare her, that is, from the kind of crack-up he suffered after accumulating naively distorted self-estimations from his early success. In this respect, at least, his parenting philosophy in the final few years of his life stays surprisingly true to the perspicacious if overdramatic moral lesson drawn at the end of “The Crack-Up”: “This is what I think now: that the natural state of the sentient adult is a

qualified unhappiness. I think also that in an adult the desire to be finer in grain than you are, ‘a constant striving’ (as those people say who gain their bread by saying it) only adds to this unhappiness in the end—that end that comes to our youth and hope” (*CU* 84). This is poor material for a pep talk but a rather valuable heuristic for anyone seeking to disabuse himself or others of the dream of being beyond the design flaws of humanity, the need to believe oneself to be white.

And yet the very whiteness *of* the critique resurfaces in the ease with which such an unforgivingly self-critical impulse can still double as the foundation for a social outlook with conservative implications. In one of the final letters he wrote to Scottie, Fitzgerald reiterated the same bleak gloss on adulthood as “qualified unhappiness” and the same warning about thinking yourself “finer in grain than you are” in slightly different, more encouraging terms. This time, he called it his “wise and tragic sense of life”:

By this I mean the thing that lies behind all great careers, from Shakespeare’s to Abraham Lincoln’s, and as far back as there are books to read—the sense that life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat, and that the redeeming things are not ‘happiness and pleasure’ but the deeper satisfactions that come out of struggle. Having learned this in theory from the lives and conclusions of great men, you can get a hell of a lot more enjoyment out of whatever bright things come your way. (*Life in Letters* 465)

Framed as both a marker of philosophical maturity and a condition of professional success (the foundation of “all great careers”), one can appreciate, again, the sentiment of humbling self-mitigation while noting the slippage back into precisely the kind of meritocratic discourse that would obscure racial difference and oppression by universalizing struggle as the baseline condition of everyone’s existence. That all “great men” have struggled is a truism as serviceable to the task of curbing overinflated egos as

it is to the moral self-defense of all the good white people out there just trying to live the Dream.



## CHAPTER 4

### **“Something that spoke of race”: Whiteness and Settler Moves to Innocence in the Novels of Willa Cather**

In her 2015 essay collection *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson critiques the long-standing “invisibility of Indigeneity” within critical whiteness studies (xix). Since its founding, the most recognizable and thoroughly pursued intellectual project of the field has been that of “historicizing the acquisition of white identity”: of examining how various not-quite-white, non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrants became white “through ideological and political means that operated to distinguish them from African American blackness” (50). Yet, as Moreton-Robinson observes, “the question of how anyone came to be white or black in the United States is inextricably tied to the dispossession of the original owners and the assumption of white possession” (51).

Slaves were brought to America as property of white people to work the land that was appropriated from Native American tribes. Subsequently, [im]migration became a means to enhance capitalist development in the United States. ... The United States as a white nation-state cannot exist without land and clearly defined borders; it is the legally defined and asserted territorial sovereignty that provides the context for national identifications of whiteness. (Moreton-Robinson 51)

Despite the undeniable links between slavery, immigrant labor, and indigenous dispossession, whiteness studies—in the American academy, at least—has been dominated by a “black/white binary” in which “tropes of migration and slavery” have eclipsed indigenous dispossession and the ongoing sovereign presence of Native Americans (Moreton-Robinson 50, 51). With the exception of Cheryl Harris’ “Whiteness

as Property,” Moreton-Robinson contends, both white and black scholars of whiteness studies have been complicit in this erasure (xix).

In the preceding readings of Rhys, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald, this project has examined constructions of white racial identity and forms of unspectacular white supremacy scattered throughout a range of mostly intra-racial scenes and discourses. I have sought not only to expand the range of ideas and practices in which we look for race as an operative factor in the lives and cultural production of white people but also to locate, in these modernist novels, racialized logics and structures of feeling that resonate particularly with the concepts and dynamics underpinning the maintenance of racial inequality under contemporary neoliberalism. So far, these neoliberally resonant racial dynamics have centered around questions of debt and labor: around the racial implications of the white poor’s alleged lack of industrious self-discipline (Rhys); around white people’s deeply ingrained, self-serving ways of thinking about debt and indebtedness (Faulkner); and around the simultaneously self-aggrandizing yet insecurity-inducing effects of fantasies about the self-sacrificing, Other-serving nature of elite, professional labor (Fitzgerald). While my chapter on Rhys accounts for and indeed relies upon the discourses of colonialism to make its claims about the intersections of race, class, and gender, the discourses under consideration there were not unique to *settler* colonialism, and as both indigenous and settler scholars have pointed out, settler colonization entails distinctive structures and motivations that cannot be adequately theorized through discussions of colonialism in other forms (Wolfe; Tuck and Yang 4-7). The final chapter of this project aims to ensure that this study of white identity does not perpetuate the erasure of settler colonialism that has plagued whiteness studies for

decades, particularly in the United States. To do so, I turn to the work of Willa Cather, an author whose fiction dwelt upon scenes of pioneering and frontier settlement more than any other modernist writer.

As I will show in a discussion ranging across multiple novels, Cather's pioneer fictions revolve around a set of themes, images, and structures of feeling that work, inadvertently but no less effectively, to erase the violence of indigenous dispossession from scenes of pioneer life on the North American frontier. Cather is hardly the only American writer whose work obscures the realities of indigenous dispossession and genocide, but her novels perpetuate this dynamic in a unique way linked, I argue, to anxieties about the moral and cultural degeneration of bourgeois whiteness in modern America. In order to begin fleshing out this link, it is useful to start with an immediate glimpse into the tonal ambience of Cather's frontier narratives and the particular kinds of aesthetic tropes that characterize her representations of white settlers. We can do this through a brief foray into one of her early novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913).

In contrast to the harrowing scenes of martial frontiersmanship most famously depicted in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, Cather was supremely uninterested in "Indian wars" and perilous adventures through the wilderness as the stuff of life on the frontier. To the extent that these things factor into her portrayals of pioneer life at all, they function merely as the contrastive backdrop against which the true material of her pioneer narratives shines through: the domestic labor, carried out mostly though not solely by women, of establishing on foreign soil an orderly, civilized home that provides a sense of comfort and security in a New World landscape while preserving the culture of the Old World nations from which the settlers have come. The opening

paragraph of *O Pioneers!*, for instance, describes the fledgling town of Hanover “trying not to be blown away” on a windy January day (3). The town’s buildings are all “huddled” on Nebraska’s “tough prairie sod,” and “[n]one of them,” the narrator remarks, “had any appearance of permanence” (3). As Alexandra Bergson, the novel’s young Swedish heroine, rides home to her family farm, we are reminded that “[t]he homesteads were few and far apart” and that “the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber wastes” (8). The forebodingly untamed landscape thus initially looms large, but as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Cather has sketched this inhospitable terrain only to highlight more vividly the epic feat of Alexandra maintaining and indeed expanding the Bergson homestead through harsh winters, bad harvests, and the death of two parents. In a series of vignettes covering 16 years in less than 40 pages, we witness no “Indian raids,” no forays into the wilderness, and barely any outdoor, agricultural labor. Rather, we see Alexandra advising her brothers on land speculation, resisting their calls to sell the farm, and ruminating with her parents on the lives of her Swedish grandparents in the Old World. Already, at the start of Part Two, we are presented with the serene image of “one of the richest farms on the Divide”:

If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra Bergson’s big house, you will find that it

is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, over-furnished; the next is almost bare. The pleasantest rooms in the house are the kitchen—where Alexandra’s three young Swedish girls chatter and cook and pickle and preserve all summer long—and the sitting-room, in which Alexandra has brought together the old homely furniture that the Bergsons used in their first log house, the family portraits, and the few things her mother brought from Sweden. (43)

After a 40-page montage of time-skipping vignettes, Cather uses the present tense to arrest the pace of the narrative, inviting “you” to pause and witness the culmination of 16 years of pioneer endurance: not a distinctly “American” national character forged, à la Jackson Turner, through the crucible of going temporarily native, nor the Cooperian spectacle of “the last” of some nobly savage race naming the Turnerian frontiersman heir to the land, but rather a homey and thriving domestic interior, a little clipping of Sweden successfully grafted onto foreign soil. The fact that this big house is “curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort” is a crucial detail meant to signify that Cather’s heroine, though successful, is not materialistic. Alexandra’s indifference to luxury clarifies (we are supposed to understand) that she had never engaged in land speculation with an intent to get rich but merely to attain economic security and provide for her family. Indeed, the narrator soon walks us outside Alexandra’s house to visit her flower garden, where we feel, we are told, not only “the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm” but also “that, properly, Alexandra’s house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (43). Though upwardly mobile, in other words, Alexandra remains—economically, physically, and spiritually—grounded: a figure of abiding rusticity and fidelity to family tradition whose achievement of bringing to what seemed like an inhospitable landscape not just “order” but beauty is a testament not to some ravenous entrepreneurialism but to more than a decade of resilient austerity and the faith she had in the land when everyone else wanted to leave it.

And it *is* Alexandra’s resilience, to be sure, that is the star of Cather’s novel. The present-tense respite of the Bergson house tour assures readers that Alexandra’s endurance is paying off, but the vast majority of the narrative depicts the litany of trials

she suffers both leading up to and long after that moment. By the time she has built her big farmhouse in Part Two, Alexandra has weathered not only the death of two parents but the departure from Hanover of her closest friend, Carl Linstrum, and the relentless criticism of her agricultural and financial practices by her two virulently misogynistic older brothers. The latter half of the novel, moreover, revolves around the tragic deaths of Alexandra's youngest and favorite brother, Emil, and her friend, Marie Shabata, two lovers who are shot by Marie's temperamental husband when he finds them lying together in an orchard. Rather than organizing these events into a steadily elaborated plot, Cather presents them in a loosely juxtaposed fashion yielding a discontinuous tableau of Alexandra's trials from youth to late middle age. The effect of this novelistic structure is to expand our focus beyond any one of Alexandra's particular adversities to a more holistic sense of the perpetually impending *atmosphere* of adversity that pioneer life entails. "She had a serious, thoughtful face," we are told of our young heroine, "and her clear, deep blue eyes were fixed intently on the distance, without seeming to see anything, as if she were in trouble" (4).

Yet, for all of the challenges that accompany life on the frontier, the overall tone of *O Pioneers!* is not one of sadness so much as equanimity and calm. In the novel's final pages, after having lost many loved ones, Alexandra contemplates the future of the farm with her childhood friend Carl, who has returned to Hanover after hearing about the tragic deaths of Emil and Marie. "Suppose I do will my land to their children," she reflects, speaking of her older brothers Lou and Oscar, "what difference will that make? The land belongs to the future .... I might as well try to will the sunset ... to my brother's children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and

understand it are the people who own it—for a little while” (158). As a novelist of the frontier, Cather was in many ways a curator of American historical memory, and her fiction works to ensure that the pioneers are enshrined there in very specific poses: namely, in postures of *exquisite resignation*. Like a cliff or a lighthouse being battered by the waves, the pioneers’ aesthetic appeal, for Cather, is proportional to their embattledness, a passive yet reassuring form of beauty defined by sanguine acceptance of limited agency and mental and spiritual fortitude in the face of uncertainty. As in Alexandra’s case, this posture is typically correlated with a somewhat ironic, tepid regard for material property. The noble figure Alexandra cuts in this final scene relies on the idealistic notion of land ownership she proposes, one based on “love” and “understand[ing]” rather than law and money. Cather assumes readers will see this not as a politically evasive form of sentimentality (which it, in fact, is) but as a gorgeously humble and scrupulous re-conception of the otherwise vulgarly materialistic property relation. In this culminating scene, Alexandra is posed in a spectacularly unassuming fashion that encourages readers to measure her not by what she has but by what she is prepared to lose—by the fact that she *is* prepared to lose the land and even expects to do so.

The overarching theme of Cather’s representations of pioneer settlers, in other words, is their epic capacity to endure deprivation and hardship. Cather’s formal and stylistic maneuvers all work to enhance this content. In novels like *O Pioneers!*, *A Lost Lady* (1923), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), we do not find settler protagonists who explore and conquer, claim and enclose, or skirmish and raid (we rarely even see them work the land, though we assume much

plowing and tilling goes on in the narrative gaps). To describe Cather's pioneers, one needs a more *passive* set of verbs: they wait and reflect; they worry and pray; they mourn; they console; they economize. Above all, they endure. This is not to say that these characters are lazy or weak but that Cather constructs frontier narratives that emphasize how white settlers *react* to the New World around them rather than how they act upon it—an aesthetic slant that downplays their participation in acquisitive projects like the accumulation of land and other forms of capital.

As signaled above, these depictions of pioneer settlers were intimately tied to anxieties Cather held about the moral and cultural degeneration of the modernized white bourgeoisie in early-twentieth-century America. Throughout her nonfiction, Cather was a relentless critic of the cultural consequences of industrialism and commercialization. These forces had created a fast-paced life full of mass-produced art and modern conveniences, which, in her view, had created in turn a modern bourgeoisie that had lost both the capacity to appreciate good art and the grace and substance of character that can only come from mettle-toughening exposure to hardship. I argue, in this chapter, that Cather's novelistic fixation on the embattled, resilient, economically austere lives of bygone settler pioneers stemmed from a desire to re-associate *whiteness* with the morally and economically virtuous and, to her, aesthetically beautiful capacity to endure hardship—an economically coded and thus seemingly race-neutral virtue from which whiteness was being increasingly severed by industrial and technological advances in the early twentieth century. The white intra-racial class conflict around which this chapter revolves, then, is the contrast Cather staged between her modern, white, bourgeois contemporaries and the host of stalwart, principled white settlers venerated in her fiction.



The latter, as we have seen in the example of Alexandra's big farmhouse, are certainly not poor. The specific pioneers Cather writes about—the ones who serve as the protagonists and focalizers of her fiction—are those who have managed to establish a degree of civilized, one might even say “bourgeois” domesticity on the frontier's rough terrain. In their outward, material circumstances, their lives might appear somewhat comparable to those of America's early-twentieth-century bourgeoisie (minus some technologies and mass-produced goods). But their *values*, their economic, social, and cultural behaviors, and the harsh, unsettled environments in which they live are all so different that they can still function as clear foils for the modern bourgeoisie Cather disdained.

Faced, then, with the reality of an America whose middle-class whites had devolved into vessels of a spoiled, trifling, Philistine form of whiteness, Cather, I argue, retreated through her fiction to the spectacle of a bygone whiteness still marked by principled idealism, mental and spiritual fortitude, and artful (literally, art-filled) living. As illustrated in the brief glimpse into *O Pioneers!* above, Cather's effort to recall and preserve a more morally and aesthetically palatable form of whiteness hinges on the way she frames the pioneers within her texts: how she captures them—from just the right angle and in just the right light—in actions and situations that position them as paragons of an exquisitely resigned, gorgeously stoic, non-acquisitive austerity. These representational strategies occur on the levels of both content and form. On the one hand, Cather showcases the determined yet humble, embattled yet steadfast, propertied yet non-materialistic whiteness of her pioneer settlers by carefully choosing which spheres or activities of pioneer life she opts to depict (patient endurance and cozy homemaking, for

instance, rather than conflicts with “Indians” or the concrete acts of capital accumulation).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, these strategies also inhere in aspects of Cather’s literary form, from her time-lapse use of narrative gaps to shifts in narrative tense and scale. Cather uses these formal and stylistic techniques to highlight even further what are, to her, admirable qualities in the character and circumstances of her pioneers. Throughout her fiction and nonfiction, Cather rarely ever *explicitly* remarks on the whiteness of either America’s modern bourgeoisie or the historical pioneers she writes about. Her lack of commentary on this topic signals, of course, the extent to which whiteness functioned as an invisible norm in her life and artistic outlook, and it suggests that in writing novels about the frontier, she was not *consciously* processing and working through anxieties about whiteness in modern America. As Richard Dyer reminds us, however, the challenge in any thorough study of white racial identity “is to see the specificity of whiteness, even when the text itself is not trying to show it to you, doesn’t even know that it is there to be shown” (13-14). In fictionalizing the trials and the resilient endurance of bygone white settlers and memorializing these figures as aesthetic ideals to shore against the ruins of a Philistine bourgeois modernity, Cather’s frontier novels do important cultural work in managing the image and connotations of whiteness, even if she was not deliberately trying to do this.

That cultural work is *premised*—to bring this back to where we began—on the reification of American settler colonialism, on obscuring the realities of indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter, I place the term “Indian” in scare quotes to signal an awareness of its problematic history and usage. I only use this term when reproducing the language used in another critic’s writing or when trying to convey the mindset of someone (like Cather) for whom this would have been the instinctive term for referring to Native Americans. Otherwise, I use the terms “Native American” or “indigenous people” in my own writing.

dispossession through depictions of white settlers as humble, non-acquisitive individuals with no personal interest in rapacious land appropriation. The historical reality, of course, is that the economically motivated and violently dispossessive policies and military campaigns of settler states are what opened up these lands to white settlement in the first place.<sup>2</sup> But as part of their work of summoning up and memorializing an aesthetically and morally superior form of whiteness as a bulwark against the degraded whiteness of bourgeois modernity, Cather's pioneer fictions all but erase the violence of settler occupation and, instead, aestheticize the act of frontier settlement into a theater for the display, by white individuals, of economically coded yet racially charged virtues like principled austerity and the capacity to endure hardship. If Cather's novels of pioneer life functioned as an aesthetic means for coping with a crisis in the meaning of modern American whiteness, they do this in a way that *takes for granted* settler-colonial ownership of the land on which that crisis *and* its therapeutic, fictional narratives play out. As Moreton-Robinson phrases it, the structures and histories of settler colonization "provide[] the *context* for national identifications of whiteness" (51, emphasis added).

Indeed, to put this claim, finally, in the terms of indigenous and settler colonial studies, this chapter reads Cather's novels as an archive of what Unangax scholar Eve

Tuck and settler scholar K. Wayne Yang call "settler moves to innocence": "those

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<sup>2</sup> In a revised and expanded version of this project, one of the things this chapter should include is a section that briefly details some of the histories of white settlement and indigenous dispossession in the *specific* geographical areas Cather writes about: the American Midwest, the American Southwest, and the St. Lawrence-River-area of present-day Canada. This would be an important part of bearing witness to the particular structures of violence and dispossession endured by indigenous nations in these areas (including but not limited to the Sioux, the Navajo, the Pueblos, the Iroquois, and the Hurons) and of breaking down the tendency to discuss "indigenous people" as an undifferentiated category rather than acknowledging the specific histories and experiences of distinct indigenous nations. (Initial research into this topic, particularly with regard to the Hurons and the Pueblos, was underway in the final stages of this dissertation's research and writing but did not make it into the final product.) It seems like this section would not fit well in the Introduction and would be better placed later in the chapter, perhaps near the beginning of what is currently Section II, where the close readings of Cather's novels actually begin.

strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege” (10). Settler moves to innocence are not limited to the things settlers say or do with conscious intent to deny complicity in settler colonialism. They can also include rhetorical and logical maneuvers deployed by settlers in contexts entirely devoid of concerns about indigenous people. Tuck and Yang cite, for instance, the tendency within social-justice work to refer to any group of marginalized people as “colonized” or the rhetoric of “occupation” used by the Occupy Movement in its calls for a redistribution of wealth that does not include a redistribution of land (17-19, 23-28). In such cases, settler moves to innocence eclipse indigenous sovereignty and obscure the specificity of settler-colonial oppression in spite (or rather because) of settlers *not* being conscious of any past or present colonization to feel guilty about. Cather’s settler moves to innocence are of this unwitting yet no less consequential type. With the exception of a few pages in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* lamenting the interment of the Navajos at Bosque Redondo, there is nothing in Cather’s fiction or nonfiction to suggest that she was troubled by her country’s past or present treatment of indigenous people. She did not write about the frontier out of some felt need to reckon with the moral and material quandaries of settler colonialism; she wrote about it out of concern for how the forces of mass consumerism and modern business were affecting a rising generation of implicitly white Americans.

Beyond suggesting that Cather’s fiction makes settler moves to innocence that are largely unwitting and subtle, then, I am arguing that her moves to innocence are also specifically white. This is an important qualification since, as many scholars have noted, settler colonialism is not perpetrated only by white people. Part of the difficulty of

theorizing it is accounting for the ways in which various non-indigenous people of color arrived on indigenous land and enjoy unequal access to the benefits of colonialism based on factors like race, class, gender, and sexuality (Byrd xii-xxvi; Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Cornassel). Cather's settler moves to innocence are both unpremeditated and racially specific. Their whiteness inheres in *both* the overwhelmingly white nature of the problem she was addressing—the degenerative consequences of a restless, mass-consumerist, thoroughly bourgeois modern existence—as well as the wholly white population she invoked to address it—the Western- or Norther-European pioneers (homesteaders, colonists, or missionaries, depending on the text) whose humble austerity furnished a set of lost values and epic aesthetic silhouettes to shore against the ruins of a modern America synonymous with mass consumption and callous profiteering.

A final clarification about the nature and scope of this chapter's interventions: as with the other chapters of this project, my engagement with Cather's novels concerns the way we read race and, specifically, whiteness in the aesthetics of modernist fiction. I am not intervening in indigenous or settler-colonial studies but rather drawing on concepts and frameworks from these fields to address oversights in studies of whiteness, Cather, and modernism. The claim that the work of a non-indigenous writer more or less completely ignores the histories and structures of settler colonization would hardly be a revelation to any indigenous person or to non-indigenous scholars who work on settler-colonial topics. Indeed, at least since the 2000s, Cather scholars themselves have pointed out this fact in many ways. The point of this chapter is not simply to note that Cather's fiction obscures the processes of indigenous dispossession (though it is crucial to register this, and we do not want to be cavalier about it). The point, rather, is to demonstrate how

particular kinds of historical fiction and modernist literary techniques are tacitly colored by white racial anxieties and fantasies with specifically settler-colonial implications, to illustrate how Cather's fiction participates in discourses of whiteness and do this in a way that registers how these forms of whiteness rely upon and reify settler-colonial histories and conditions. Tuck and Yang's formulation of settler moves to innocence—as a set of “strategies or positionings” by which settlers, however (un)consciously, relieve feelings of responsibility for colonialization—is especially apropos because this chapter, at its core, is about the ideologically fraught positionings of white pioneers in Cather's fiction: the way she poses them in specific activities, situations, and postures that allow her to narrate frontier settlement as a process that white people “endured” rather than carried out. This is not an archive or method that centers the voices and experiences of indigenous people (an absolutely crucial endeavor successfully advanced by much indigenous studies scholarship but one to which Cather's fiction could hardly contribute). It is, however, an archive and method that broadens our awareness of the many differently racialized aesthetic forms that settler moves to innocence can take—a contribution to the larger project of unsettling settler innocence, which is particularly pressing with regard to a canonical American author whose narratives of frontier settlement are still celebrated today as honest, unadorned records of a rustically humble and even progressively multicultural America. I aim not to vilify Cather for her bad settler politics (as if she were unique in this regard) but to reveal how those very politics, the racial anxieties and therapeutic fantasies they encode, are a key part of her past and present aesthetic appeal, particularly for white, bourgeois readers.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first section begins with a survey of the ways in which race and settler colonialism have been discussed so far in Cather scholarship. I then embark on an in-depth exploration of Cather's speeches, interviews, and essays in the 1920s and 1930s. I show how her nonfiction criticisms of the modern American bourgeoisie provide a solid justification and framework for reading her novelistic depictions of bygone pioneers as attempts to memorialize and cling to a form of whiteness free of the moral degeneracy and Philistinism that Cather viewed as byproducts of modernization. Her jeremiads against America's modern bourgeoisie condemn the way that mass consumption and modern conveniences have robbed people of certain economically coded and thus seemingly race-neutral virtues: austere resilience, self-discipline, and mettle. I argue, then, that her literary portraits of past settlers awash in these qualities must be read as racialized aesthetic tropes providing a fictional escape from the onrush of modernity and its negative effects on white America. With this nonfiction scaffolding in place, Section II then focuses on close readings of Cather's fiction, bearing out these claims through analyses of both narrative content and form. These close readings move across four of Cather's frontier-based novels: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). Section III offers a brief conclusion, gesturing toward the contemporary stakes of this chapter's engagement with Cather's work.

### **I. "Restlessness such as ours": Modernity, Whiteness, and Cather in Context**

For a writer whose oeuvre is so consistently concerned with the settlement of the frontier, there has been relatively little scholarship in the past few decades examining the

settler-colonial elements of Cather's work and virtually none exploring the links between settler-colonialism and white racial identity. As early as the 1970s, critics wrote about representations of "Indians" in Cather's fiction, but early treatments of this subject did not identify these depictions as part of a settler-colonialist discourse so much as discuss Cather's "appreciation" for indigenous cultures without recognizing that appreciation's fetishistic dynamics: its reduction of Native Americans *to* de-politicized cultures, imagined as primitive remedies for the ills of modernity available for white aesthetic appropriation (Stouck; Swinehart). By the mid-1990s, critics were writing more scholarly monographs entirely devoted to Cather, but the majority of these studies have nothing critical to say about the settler-colonial ramifications of the major themes and tropes of Cather's work. Guy Reynolds' *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* sounds exactly like the kind of study that would at least mention the settler-colonialist processes of Manifest Destiny as a context for Cather's fiction, but there is in fact no discussion of settler colonialism in his book. Joseph Urgo's *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* uses Cather's fiction to show that "the central theme ... that defines American culture at its core is migration," "the vigilant maintenance of unsettled lives, impermanent connections, and continuous movements in space" that keep Americans resilient, adaptable, and vigorous (5, 15). The issue of settler colonization, of the appropriation of the indigenous lands that make all this American migration possible, does not factor into Urgo's argument, despite the fact that he uses phrases like "empire of migration" in his writing (5).<sup>3</sup> Finally, in *The Imaginative Claims of the Artist in Willa*

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there are numerous moments throughout his study where Urgo makes offhand comments that either position indigenous people, as opposed to settlers, as sources of violence on the frontier or cast indigenous people's rootedness to place as a culturally Darwinistic explanation for their disappearance.



*Cather's Fiction: "Possession Granted by a Different Lease,"* Demaree C. Peck examines the vocabulary and tropes of both Cather's fiction and nonfiction to argue that all of her novels work as "variations of a single story": "the artist's quest to achieve imaginative possession of the world in order to recover the dominion of her own soul" (30). Peck shows how "Cather's protagonists, serving as her surrogates [as figures of the artist], lay claim to the world as their own mental property," "appropriate [it] as a reflection of the self" (30). As both the subtitle of Peck's monograph as well as the few quotes from it already provided here suggest, the language of possession and acts of appropriation are the crux of Peck's readings, yet there is no attention paid to the material, settler-colonial valence of this theme—this, despite the fact that, like Urgo, there are many instances where Peck's terminology is rife with colonizing connotations ("Cather's characters absorb the world in order to recreate an imperial self" [D. Peck 31]).

Since the 1990s and early 2000s, however, critics have produced far more sophisticated analyses of the settler-colonialist dynamics in Cather's work, and there are typically two ways in which critics have done this. The first method is to point out how Cather's novels about the frontier more or less completely erase histories of indigenous sovereignty and dispossession from the places about which she wrote. This is the method employed by Mike Fischer, who examines *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!* to show how Cather's novels of the Great Plains eclipse the history of treaty violations and other forms

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"Seventeenth-century Puritan settlers," Urgo writes in his Introduction, "were schooled in the practice of transit by their vulnerability to capture and forced removal by migrant Native Americans" (9). At the end of his first chapter, which involves a reading of *The Professor's House*, Urgo sums up the moral of the story with these concluding sentences: "The cliff dwellers ultimately were defeated by tribes that dwelt nowhere in particular, tribes that kept moving. These tribes were in turn conquered by migratory Americans who had traveled even further, with fewer ties to place, whose spatial conception of the future far outweighed their memories of the past" (39).

of settler-colonial violence perpetrated against the Oglalla Sioux. This first approach to illuminating the settler-colonial dimensions of Cather's aesthetics works, then, by focusing on the overall *absence* of indigenous people in her fiction. The second approach taken by critics revolves around discussing the ways indigenous people and cultures *do* appear in her work in the fleeting moments where this occurs. Like Fischer, Janis Stout has noted the various ways in which Cather wrote indigenous people and indigenous dispossession out of her fiction, despite living in places where Native Americans would still have been present during her lifetime or were only very recently removed (8, 109-110, 156-158, 196). In addition to this, however, Stout also observes that when Cather *does* incorporate indigenous people or tropes of indigeneity into her work, she does so in ways that construct indigeneity as a thing of the past or as something rapidly passing from the present. In *The Professor's House* (1925), for instance, the Anasazi people are given a metonymic, archaeological existence in the form of pottery shards and cliff cities that fascinate the humble, boyish adventurer Tom Outland, yet "his esteem for the Anasazi relics," Stout notes, "entails no equivalent esteem for living Native Americans" (228). Likewise, "[i]n *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, two years later, Cather's emphasis would again be on the death or dying of the Indians," who have no role to play "in her vision of contemporary America" (Stout 228). To be clear, *Archbishop* does contain numerous representations of living indigenous people (it is the *only* Cather novel to do so), but Stout is still correct in observing that the representations of Native Americans that do appear in this text are oriented toward a horizon of death. The Pueblo and Navajo people that feature in the story of Bishop Jean-Marie Latour's efforts to found the first Catholic diocese in 1850s New Mexico are, as I discuss later in this

chapter, portrayed in ways that highlight their non-modernity, their impenetrability to Catholic evangelism and Americanization. This impenetrability is not presented, by Cather, as some kind of noble and deliberate, anti-colonial indigenous nationalism but rather as a chaotic part of the untamed, un-Christian landscape that her pioneer hero has to contend with, part of the local color or backdrop of the Southwestern frontier against which her white protagonist's racialized virtues of patient endurance, tolerance, and humble resolve shine through.

One of the strongest critiques of Cather's settler-colonialist representations of indigenous people comes from Caroline Woidat, who reads *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *The Professor's House* in the context of commercialized, turn-of-the-century tourist advertisements for travel to the American Southwest. Cather herself was an avid participant in this tourist economy, and she was particularly smitten with the ancient, Native American cliff cities carved into the mesa that were a principal attraction of the area. Woidat shows that in addition to providing a primitivist escape from the stiflingly overcivilized, industrial conditions of modern existence, the cliff cities "offered tourists an opportunity to transcend political and cultural conflicts between whites and Native Americans and identify with cliff dwellers as their 'own' ancestors and fellow citizens" (Woidat 35). In selling the cliff cities to modern travelers, tourist advertisements made much of the fact that "[t]he cliff dwellers had 'vanished' mysteriously" before the arrival of Columbus or Coronado's Spaniards and also described the apartment-building-like cliff dwellings as forms of architecture "linked to modern American rather than Native American culture" (Woidat 31). The cliff dwellers were thus *de-indigenized* in these advertisements, "ennobled as the forerunners of *American* civilization" and seen, in light

of their architectural achievements, as “more ‘civilized’ than ... tribes who later defended their land against European invaders” (Woidat 30, emphasis added, 31). Visiting these long-empty cliff cities thus allowed travelers both “to escape their own country’s history of conflict with Native Americans” and to “embrace the ancient people as their own relatives” (Woidat 29). Cather, Woidat shows, was an uncritical consumer of this touristic discourse in her own life, and it played out in her novels. In *The Professor’s House*, for example, Tom Outland claims that he has a sense of “filial piety” for the cliff dwellers, whose ruins he and his friend Rodney have worked to excavate (227). When Rodney sells a few of the cliff dweller relics, Tom—who, like Rodney was orphaned at a young age—furiously chastises him for the sale: ““they weren’t mine to sell—nor yours! They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from”” (Cather, *Professor’s House* 219). It is worth noting that the kinds of dynamics Woidat identifies—where the indigeneity of indigenous people is erased by settlers claiming them as American or where settlers indigenize themselves by claiming some fancied, ancestral relation to indigenous people—are one of the key types of settler moves to innocence that Tuck and Yang specifically name in their article. They call these “settler adoption fantasies”: stories, like *The Last of the Mohicans*, that envision a settler being adopted by Native Americans because he has internalized indigenous knowledges and practices or like *The Professor’s House*, where a settler adopts an indigenous nation, by fiat, as his own patria (Tuck and Yang 14-17).

While a good deal of Cather scholarship thus ignores the question of settler colonialism entirely, some scholars have carefully attended to the ways in which Cather’s

fiction undermines indigenous sovereignty either by erasing indigenous peoples or representing them in unwittingly problematic ways. The issue of settler colonialism in Cather's work is closely associated with yet still distinct from the issue of race. When discussing the latter, scholars have tended to focus on Cather's representations of black, Mexican, or indigenous people or of not-quite-white Eastern-European immigrants like *My Ántonia*'s Ántonia Shimerda. Early critics of Cather's work, like Guy Reynolds, established a reputation for Cather as a writer who held a "multicultural" vision of America quite unique and progressive for her time. This claim relied upon the alleged racial and ethnic diversity of the frontiers depicted in her fiction, the mix of Swedish, Czech, German, and French immigrants, Mexicans, and occasionally Native Americans that populate her fiction's frontier locales. Since 2000, most of the scholarship discussing race in Cather's novels focuses on her representations of non- or not-quite-white racial Others, fleshing out further the nature of Cather's supposed, immigrant-loving multiculturalism and, often (but not always), identifying its limitations and oversights. For example, in her reading of *My Ántonia*, Linda Joyce Brown argues that Cather constructs her eponymous, immigrant heroine "both as an ethnically-marked Bohemian and as a white American," a construction that folds Ántonia into the self-consciously white American nation while still retaining a hint of ethnic diversity that allows Cather to exude an air of "cultural pluralism" (83, 84). However, Brown argues, the condition of Ántonia's racial whitening is the reification and exclusion of blackness via Blind D'Arnault, an African American jazz pianist whose savage rhythms are a textbook example of modernist primitivism. "It is only because black Otherness is reified through th[is] character," Brown observes, "that the Bohemian Ántonia can enter into whiteness"

(84). Many critics have pointed out that aside from the Czech Catholic *Ántonia*, the “celebrated ethnic variety” of Cather’s Nebraska frontier was never in fact “*too* various” (Stout 154, original emphasis). The Swedes, Norwegians, Acadian French, Danes, Germans, and Russians that populate Cather’s pioneer Midwest are “not only not-black,” Stout observes, “but also not-Italian, not-Asian, [and] not-Jewish” (154). Her Nebraska pioneers are thus neither people of color nor members of those historically stigmatized, “ethnic” European groups whose presence would be a crucial part of any truly multicultural, diverse literary vision. Speaking of the novels set in the Southwest, Stout also notes that in addition to depicting Native Americans as people incompatible with modernity, Cather generally adopts “a denigrating or at best condescending attitude toward Mexicans,” whom she either “romanticiz[es] as innocent and quaint” or portrays as foolish, impulsive, indigent, and fickle (240). Despite such critiques, some critics have continued to detail the multicultural inclinations of Cather’s fiction while admitting its limitations. In his reading of *The Song of the Lark*, *The Professor’s House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Christopher Schedler acknowledges that “Cather’s representations of other cultures in the Southwest have been characterized as primitivist and racist,” yet he still sets out to show that “Cather’s Southwestern fiction is centrally concerned with the aesthetic ‘preservation’ of Native American and Mexican cultures” (86, 85).

It is absolutely imperative that we be aware of the ways that Cather erased indigenous people and indigenous sovereignty from the places about which she wrote. We must also be able to decipher the representations of indigenous people and cultures that *do* appear in her fiction as the unwittingly self-serving embodiments of settler

fantasies and anxieties they almost always are. Finally, we also need to examine the uses and implications of Cather's representations of not-quite-white European immigrants like *Ántonia* and of non-indigenous people of color, such as African Americans, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans. These are indispensable components of the racial and settler-colonial dimensions of Cather's work—are indeed the groundwork for comprehending these things. The problem I am identifying, then, is not that Cather scholars have failed to discuss settler colonialism or race. They *have* discussed settler colonialism (or at least some of them have), and this chapter follows Fischer in locating Cather's settler-colonial politics in the way her fiction erases histories of indigenous dispossession and takes for granted settler access to the land. What Cather scholars have *not* done is fully consider how *whiteness* manifests in her work. They have tended to equate discussions of race with discussions of characters who are completely outside whiteness or straddling its boundaries: black people, Native Americans, Mexicans, and not-quite-white European immigrants like *Ántonia*. Yet this is not the only way of reading whiteness in Cather's work. If we think about race in terms of contrasts made *between* white people by way of seemingly race-neutral, economically coded virtues, then there are things to be said about whiteness even in texts or in parts of texts that revolve around settlers who are squarely within the bounds of whiteness as a racial category—readings that still attend to how the structures and assumptions of settler-colonial occupancy “provide[] the context for national identifications of whiteness” (Moreton-Robinson 51). The first step in addressing this scholarly oversight is to look at what Cather thought not about Native or African Americans, Mexicans, or immigrant Bohemians but about white, bourgeois, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (otherwise known simply as “Americans”) in the early twentieth

century.

A modernist in form but a Romantic in sentiment, Cather relentlessly maintained that industrialization, new technologies, and mass consumerism had degraded the production and consumption of art in modern America. In a 1925 speech at Bowdoin College, she argued that “the modern novel, the cinema, and the radio form an equal menace to human culture” and that the novel had even become “too democratic,” “too easy to read and too easy to write” (*Willa Cather in Person* 155, 157).<sup>4</sup> This criticism builds upon comments Cather made a year earlier in a 1924 interview with journalist Rose C. Feld for *The New York Times Book Review*:

“Don’t confuse reading with culture or art,” [Miss Cather] said .... “So many books are sold today because of the economic condition of this country, not the cultural. We have a great prosperous middle class, in cities, in suburbs, in small towns, on farms .... They want a book which will fill up commuting boredom every morning and evening; ... they want a book to keep in the automobile while they’re waiting for tardy friends or relatives; they want fillers-in, in a word, something to take off the edge of boredom and empty leisure. Publishers, who are, after all, business men [*sic*], recognize the demand and pour forth their supply.” (*WCIP* 68)

The quality of literature in America had thus declined, in Cather’s view, because of a Philistine, bourgeois reading public that only wants to be entertained and because of commercial publishers who pander to these Philistine tastes. This line of argumentation eventually led Cather to make what would appear to be some unabashedly elitist declarations: “Forty years ago, ... only good books were published, only cultivated people read. The others didn’t read at all, or if they did it was the newspapers, the almanac, and the Bible on Sundays. ... Fine books were written for fine people” (*WCIP*

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<sup>4</sup> Further quotations from this collection of Cather’s nonfiction are cited in-text with the abbreviation “*WCIP*.”



69). No doubt aware that this language of fineness might sound condescending, Cather immediately added an important clarification:

“The discrimination is not a snobbish one .... By the fine reader I don’t necessarily mean the man or woman with a cultivated background, an academic, or a wealthy background. I mean the person with quickness and richness of mentality, fineness of spirituality. You found it often in a carpenter or a blacksmith who went to his few books for recreation and inspiration.” (*WCIP* 69)

Though it is not, perhaps, the most obvious takeaway here, I would suggest that this account of the “fine reader”—when read alongside Cather’s remarks about people who only want books “to take off the edge of boredom and empty leisure”—clarifies that a crucial component of modern, bourgeois America’s Philistinism is a lack of discipline and mettle: a woeful inability to endure even the smallest of inconveniences, manifested aesthetically in a taste for “easy” literature. The same processes of industrialization that have made America’s “great prosperous middle class” materially comfortable have also made it more needy and trifling. Cather’s repeated jibes at the quintessentially bourgeois problem of “boredom” are an apt register of this cultural development: nothing illustrates how low Americans’ tolerance for adversity has fallen better than a pervasive, urgently felt need to alleviate the most *unurgent* form of adversity imaginable. Contrast this to the “carpenter or blacksmith who went to his few books for recreation and inspiration.” The term “recreation” here might seem to suggest a vapid desire for mere entertainment akin to that of the modern bourgeoisie, but it is clearly implied that the preindustrial carpenter or blacksmith Cather envisions went to his books *for the books*—to appreciate their artistry rather than simply to kill time. The novel was *not* “too easy to read” in the past, then, because there were still people who devoted time and energy to books that were artistically and intellectually complex—even if this meant they were less easily read.

Cather sums up these criticisms in the Feld interview, insisting that America's newfound wealth had yielded a culture of crude materialism where luxuriousness and immediate gratification trump sound and purposeful composition as the prevailing criteria of aesthetic appeal: "'It's our prosperity, our judging success in terms of dollars. ... It makes for nice, easy family life but not for art. ... Restlessness such as ours, success such as ours, striving such as ours, do not make for beauty. Other things must come first: good cookery; cottages that are homes, not playthings; gardens; repose.'" (*WCIP* 70-71).

These references to cooking, gardening, and homemaking bring us to what Cather felt were the best remedies for America's commercially and industrially induced artistic decay. Chief among these were a return to Romantic craftsmanship ideals and a greater appreciation for the humble yet substantial forms of artistry implicit in the creative and ordering rituals of everyday life, such as cooking and housework. In describing these panaceas, Cather used a language as rife with prescriptions of discipline, diligence, and resilience as the language she used to criticize the Philistine restlessness being remedied. "I think it a great misfortune for every one [*sic*] to have a chance to write—to have a chance to read," she lamented, clearly referring to what she then saw as the low-quality aesthetic productions passing for "culture" in modern America:

"A little culture makes lazy handiwork, and handiwork is a beautiful education in itself .... Good carpentry, good weaving, all the handicrafts were much sounder forms of education than what the people are getting now.

"... The one education which amounts to anything is learning how to do something well, whether it is to make a bookcase or write a book. If I could get a carpenter to make me some good bookcases I would have as much respect for him as I have for the people whose books I want to put on them." (*WCIP* 79-80)

This appreciation for the artistry of good "handiwork" goes beyond the masculine realm of the preindustrial trades to include the domestic arts as well. "'There is a real art in

cooking a roast just right,” Cather remarks, and “the farmer’s wife who raises a large family and cooks for them and makes their clothes and keeps house and on the side runs a truck garden and a chicken farm and a canning establishment, and thoroughly enjoys doing it all, and doing it well, contributes more to art than all the culture clubs” (*WCIP* 47). The constant refrain here of making or doing something “well” continues the latent criticism of an undisciplined, frivolous America identified in Cather’s earlier comments about the nation’s great, prosperous middle class. It is not carpentry or roast cooking in and of itself, after all, in which Cather is interested. Her primary concern is the degradation of art in early-twentieth-century America, which the quality of the preindustrial carpenter’s well-made bookcase or of the farmer’s wife’s domestic economy brings into relief. The language in which Cather couches these claims, however, implies a judgment not just about the declining quality of American art but about the source and causes of that decline. It suggests that modern Americans have lost certain *character traits*, ones that the mastery of preindustrial handicraft production used to instill: patience, diligence, the determination to commit oneself to a challenge and see it through—which is always a part of “learning how to do something well,” regardless of what that something is. To suggest that modern Americans do not know how to do this—“this” being neither carpentry nor housework but the broader capacity of applying oneself to an aesthetic or practical endeavor and sticking to it with enough care and investment to “do it well”—is to suggest that modern bourgeois Americans suffer from an inability to face challenges of any kind, a weakness reflected in the “lazy handiwork” then passing for modern culture and, especially, in the bourgeoisie’s taste for “easy” literature. Spoiled by their “prosperity” and “easy family life,” incapable even of withstanding the

inconvenience of being bored, modern bourgeois Americans have gone soft. They have lost their mettle.

Both the underlying values and the national specificity of Cather's criticisms are further clarified by the comments she makes about a contrasting group of people who, in her estimation, have escaped this modern cultural malaise. The French, Cather insists, have retained the values and character traits that make for good art and cultured society:

"We [Americans] can build excellent bridges; we can put up beautiful office buildings,

factories ... but literary art, painting, sculpture, no. We haven't yet acquired the good sense of discrimination possessed by the French, for instance. They have a great purity of tradition; they all but murder originality, and yet they worship it. The taste of the nation is represented by the Academy; it is a corrective rod which the young artist ever dreads. He revolts against it, but he cannot free himself from it. ... Here in America, on the other hand, every little glimmer of color calls itself art.... It's rather pathetic." (*WCIP* 70)

Cather's praise for French art is thus inextricable from her praise of French discipline.

The latter is the former's condition of possibility, and the main point of this nation-to-nation comparison is that artistic production actually benefits from conditions of austerity. The "corrective rod" of the Academy and the "sense of discrimination" and "tradition" that pervade the French artist's social and cultural milieu do not prohibit artistic originality but merely prevent a "pathetic[ally]" self-indulgent lowering of standards. True to the aesthetic philosophy outlined above, Cather's claims about the superior aesthetic sensibility of the French extend beyond "literary art, painting, [and] sculpture" to the more informal forms of artistry embedded in everyday life. "The Frenchman," she maintains, is "greatly occupied with building the things that make his home. His house, his garden, his vineyards, these are the things that fill his mind" (*WCIP*

71). Even Cather's earlier comments about America's artistically corruptive ease and affluence are actually part of a comparative critique:

"It's our prosperity, our judging success in terms of dollars. Life not only gives us wages for our toil but a bonus besides. It makes for nice, easy family life but not for art. The French people, on the other hand, have had no bonus. Their minds have been formed by rubbing up cruelly with the inescapable realities of life .... [Edith] Wharton expressed it very well in a recent article when she said that the Frenchman elected to live at home and use his wits to make his condition happy. He don't want [*sic*] an easier land. He chose France, above all, as the home of his family, and his children after them." (*WCIP* 70)

Where Americans tend toward restless striving, the French tend toward *repose*, which is not, in Cather's formulation, the same thing as ease, the absence of hardship, but is rather a capacity for taking hardship in stride, a kind of staying power (literally exemplified here by the act of settling on and refusing to leave a particular area of land).

Cather's fictional preoccupation with the stalwart, exquisitely resigned pioneers, I argue, must be understood in the context of these nonfiction jeremiads about the cultural degeneracy of post-pioneer, bourgeois America. In recreating the lives of Alexandra Bergson and other settlers on the North American frontier, Cather was indulging in a form of nostalgic escapism, a means of coping with the disappointments of modern American culture by immersing herself (and her readers) in the memory of times, places, and people unmarred by the Philistine consequences of industrialization and mass consumerism. In fact, Cather was unabashedly forthright about these escapist inclinations. In a 1936 letter to *The Commonwealth* magazine, she openly scorned the idea that artists have any obligation to be political in times of crisis. "[T]he world has a habit of being in a bad way from time to time," she contended, "and art has never contributed

anything to help matters – except escape” (*On Writing* 19).<sup>5</sup> Literary artists, she claimed, are especially burdened with the expectation of “loyalty to a cause”: “[s]ince poets and novelists do not speak in symbols or a special language, but in the plain speech which all men use and all men ... read, they are told that their first concern should be to cry out against social injustice” (*OW* 20, 22). But fiction, Cather insists, is a “rickety” vehicle for “the propagandists,” and “the man who wants to reform industrial conditions” should “follow the method of the pamphleteers” (*OW* 23). Granted, she concedes, “[t]here have been generous and bold spirits among the artists: ... Citizen Shelley stepped into line and drove his pen—but he was not very useful to the reforms which fired his imagination. He was ‘useful,’ if you like that word, only as all true poets are, because they *refresh and recharge the spirit* of those who can read their language” (*OW* 20, emphasis added). Cather spoke of her own fiction—specifically those works set on unsettled frontiers—in terms of a similar emotional effect, as works whose chief merit was that of giving her as a writer (and us, we presume, as readers) the sensation of being spiritually “refreshe[d].” Writing to one reviewer about *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), her novel about French colonists living in barely settled, late-seventeenth-century Quebec, Cather reflected:

To me the rock of Quebec is not only a stronghold on which many strange figures have for a little time cast a shadow in the sun; it is the curious endurance of a kind of culture .... There, among the country people and the nuns, I caught something new to me; a kind of feeling about life and human fate that I could not accept, wholly, but which I could not but admire[,] ... [one] full of pious resignation. ... Those people brought a kind of French culture there and somehow kept it alive on that rock, sheltered it and on occasion died for it, as if it really were a sacred fire – and all this temperately and shrewdly, with emotion always tempered by good sense.

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<sup>5</sup> Further quotations from this collection of Cather’s nonfiction are cited in-text with the abbreviation “*OW*.”

It's very hard for an American to catch that rhythm – it's so unlike us. But I made an honest try, and I got a great deal of pleasure out of it, if nobody else does! (*OW* 15-17)

The effect on Cather of the settler “endurance” she describes here is precisely that of a spiritually recharging breath of fresh air, an *escape* from the modern “rhythm” of restless, trifling American life to an older rhythm of noble repose, which connotes, again, not the absence of hardship but the capacity to weather precariousness and austerity “temperately and shrewdly,” to accept the blows of “fate” gracefully, with “pious resignation.” Cather felt similarly refreshed when writing *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), her narrative of French Catholic missionaries spreading their faith in the newly annexed American territory of 1850s New Mexico. In another letter to *The Commonweal*, Cather recalled reading the letters of the real-life priest on whom she based one of the book's protagonists: “What I got from Father Machebeuf's letters was the mood, the spirit in which they accepted the accidents and hardships of a desert country” (*OW* 10). In writing *Archbishop*, Cather sought to convey this “hardihood of spirit” to her readers (*OW* 10).

From the 1920s to the 1930s, then, Cather's views of American art and American culture revolved around a critique of the modern bourgeoisie's lack of aesthetic taste, a lazy palate she attributed in turn to the socioeconomic problem of shallow, bourgeois “restlessness”: an inability to endure challenges or hardships of any kind. The final piece of this contextual puzzle pertains to the *racial* specificity of Cather's criticisms, which, unlike their national specificity, is entirely tacit. Nowhere in her critiques of the American bourgeoisie does Cather explicitly associate the degeneration she saw in modern American art with a degeneration in American whiteness. The *class* parameters of her criticisms, however, clearly imply a circumscribed demographic. “It's our

prosperity,” our “easy family life”; “Life not only gives us wages for our toil but a bonus besides.” We do not need Cather to specify the race of the people she is talking about to know that when she speaks of “a great prosperous middle class” in early-twentieth-century America, she is speaking of a bourgeoisie that is almost entirely white. Countless Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, after all, were not paid any wages for their toil (let alone a bonus besides) until after 1865, and embourgeoisement for some—“in cities, in suburbs, in small towns, [and] on farms”—required the dispossession and exploitation of others still barred from “prosperity” and “easy family life” by institutions like the Dawes General Allotment Act or the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The implicit racial homogeneity of Cather’s thinking is evident, however, in more than just the class parameters of her nonfiction. The centering of white lives and white perspectives is equally conspicuous in her novels, where the whiteness of her characters is frequently (though not always) *as* unmarked as that of the “prosperous middle class” taken to task in her nonfiction criticism. In all of the fiction Cather wrote about pioneer homesteaders on the Great Plains, for example, there are only two black characters: Blind D’Arnault, the touring pianist in *My Ántonia* (1918) whose savagely beautiful jazz music is a textbook example of modernist primitivism, and a speechless servant character in *A Lost Lady* (1923) bluntly named Black Tom. As noted above, Cather’s fiction often alludes to the bygone presence of indigenous people via archaeological traces like pottery shards or cliff cities, but her novels almost never acknowledge the presence of living Native Americans in modern America. And while Cather is often regarded, due to novels like *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, as a writer of immigrant literature, critics have long pointed out that the immigrant homesteaders she lovingly fictionalized were never that



racially diverse. As noted earlier, Cather was not writing about those groups, like the Irish, Italians, or Jews, that critical whiteness studies has taught us not to mistake for white in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most liminally white of the immigrant groups about whom Cather wrote were Bohemians, like the Catholic *Ántonia* Shimerda, and even this exception to an otherwise entirely white immigrant cast has been qualified by Cather scholars. During World War I (the time of *My Ántonia*'s writing and publication), the Bohemians, or Czechs, were "the most Western and consequently least threatening of the Eastern European peoples toward which the [United States] government was willing to extend the promise of self-determination" (Fischer 41). This was "a promise much vaunted by Woodrow Wilson in his war aims," and favoring Bohemians was thus a gesture of wartime propaganda, "an ideological figuration of American tolerance" (Stout 156; Fischer 41).

Overwhelmingly, however, it is Northern and Western European immigrants that occupy Cather's literary limelight, and *their* whiteness, historically, was never in question. Take the Swedish Bergsons in *O Pioneers!*, for example. As historian Jason E. Pierce observes in *Making the White Man's West*, the settlement of the Great Plains in the late nineteenth century was largely driven by the construction and advertising efforts of major railroad companies. "Instead of simply building a line to tap an existing market," Pierce explains, railroads building into the unsettled Plains were faced with the task of "creating a market" that their lines would supply (151). Thus, in addition to building the transportation infrastructure for future settlements, these companies "charged their land departments with advertising to prospective settlers" (Pierce 153-154, 154). These "colonization project[s]" were not pitched to everyone equally (Pierce 154).

Railroad executives, like most other nineteenth century Americans, made numerous distinctions between ethnic and racial groups. Certainly, they saw racial divisions between whites and African Americans or Native Americans, but they also discriminated between the ethnic groups of Europe, or as many preferred to call them, the “races” of Europe. “Real” whites, usually defined as those of Northern European ancestry, rated as the most desirable potential citizens. Believed to be hardworking, independent, and intelligent, they allegedly made ideal settlers. (Pierce 152)

Advertisements thus “consciously targeted Germans, Scandinavians, and Englishmen to a much greater degree than the Irish,” for instance, as the former groups were imagined to be industrious, “of the Protestant faith, and racially white” (Pierce 155, 154). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the whiteness of Cather’s Scandinavian heroine in *O Pioneers!* inspires occasional narrative commentary. Alexandra’s skin, we are told, “is of such smoothness and whiteness as none but Swedish women ever possess; skin with the freshness of the snow itself” (45). At another point, the narrator, in language reminding us, perhaps, of her Protestant discipline, describes Alexandra “prosecut[ing] her bath with vigor,” pouring cold water over her “gleaming white body” (106).

Explicit comments about whiteness, to be clear, are *not* a frequent part of *O Pioneers!* or any of Cather’s other frontier fictions, but they should still be taken seriously as indicators of a pervasive, *underlying* racial consciousness informing her fictional production and nonfiction criticism. Race may not have been the dominant lens through which Cather viewed her pioneer characters or her contemporary, Philistine compatriots, but it was certainly not irrelevant. The narrow focus, throughout Cather’s nonfiction, on the tastes and habits only of Americans living in material prosperity reveals the extent to which her cultural criticisms were informed by an economic background shaped by her own whiteness. And if, as I have argued, Cather’s fictional

preoccupation with hardy, austere pioneers was an escapist reaction to the nonfiction spectacle of modern America's restless, spoiled, Philistine bourgeoisie, then the explicit attention called to the whiteness of a character like Alexandra should clue us into the fact that Cather's judgments about the aesthetic degeneracy of America's great prosperous middle class are constantly limned with a diagnosis of racial degeneracy as well. The nail in the coffin of any race-neutral reading of Cather's nonfiction commentary or her pioneer novels appears in her reflections on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Writing of the first Bishop of New Mexico, Jean-Baptiste Lamy, on whom the novel's protagonist is based, Cather recalled the experience of seeing a great statue of Lamy outside the Cathedral in Santa Fe: "I never passed that life-size bronze of him ... without wishing that I could learn more about a pioneer churchman who looked so well-bred and distinguished. In his pictures one felt the same thing, something fearless and fine and very, very well-bred—*something that spoke of race*" (OW 7, emphasis added). One cannot possibly read this comment without concluding that the pioneer qualities of humility, patience, and austere perseverance embodied by *Archbishop's* Lamy-inspired protagonist, Jean-Marie Latour, are likewise meant to speak of race, and my contention here is that Cather's remarks about Latour (by way of Lamy) exemplify a structure of feeling that resonates *across* her frontier narratives. From *O Pioneers!* and *A Lost Lady* to *Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather's pioneers' displays of austere endurance, anti-materialistic idealism, and artistic sensitivity comprise a set of tacitly racialized qualities: memories of what whiteness in the New World once was, conjured up as a therapeutic escape from the knowledge of what whiteness in modern America had since become.

## II. Whiteness and Settler Moves to Innocence in Cather's Pioneer Fiction

With a fuller sense of Cather's nonfiction criticisms and their tacit racial dimensions in place, we can now turn to her literary portrayals of pioneer life and discern the extent to which these are, indeed, racially charged, despite the overall lack of explicit references to race and whiteness in her texts. What does whiteness look like in Cather's novels of frontier life, and how do its manifestations function as settler moves to innocence?

In one of the most crucial scenes of Cather's 1923 novel *A Lost Lady*, Captain Daniel Forrester, an aging railroad magnate and a pioneering founder of the small Midwestern town of Sweet Water, returns home from a business trip announcing to his wife and friends that he is a "a poor man" (73).<sup>6</sup> The Captain had been the chief officer of a bank in Denver, "one which paid good interest on small deposits" and whose depositors were predominantly "railroad employés, mechanics, and day labourers, many of whom had at some time worked for [him]" (LL 74). The bank had begun to fail, and the Captain had gone to see what could be done:

His was the only well-known name among the bank officers, it was the name which promised security and fair treatment to his old workmen and their friends. The other directors were promising young business men [*sic*] with many irons in the fire. But ... they had refused to come up to the scratch and pay their losses like gentlemen. They claimed that the bank was insolvent, not through unwise investments or mismanagement, but because of a nation-wide financial panic .... They argued that the fair thing was to share the loss with the depositors ....

Captain Forrester had stood firm that not one of the depositors should lose a dollar. The promising young business men had listened to him respectfully, but finally told him they would settle only on their own terms; any additional refunding must be his affair. He sent to the vault for his private steel box, opened it in their presence, and sorted the contents on the table. The government bonds he

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations from this novel hereafter cited, in-text, with the abbreviation "LL."

turned in at once. Judge Pommeroy was sent to sell the mining stocks and other securities in the open market. (LL 74-75)

This dramatic display of noblesse oblige cuts to the heart of *A Lost Lady*'s principal theme: the vanishing of a noble generation of pioneers, replete with moral integrity and a communal spirit, displaced by a rising class of unscrupulously profiteering modern "business men." Contrary to the petty materialism of the restlessly acquisitive modern bourgeoisie, Cather defines her pioneer hero in terms of a marked disregard for the accumulation and retention of wealth, a willingness to sacrifice profit for the sake of unprofitable ideals, however old-fashioned. In this respect, the episode of the bank failure simply dramatizes, to spectacular extremes, a trait of our pioneer hero already signaled in the novel's opening pages, when Cather's narrator describes the condition of the Forrester estate: "Any one but Captain Forrester would have drained the bottom land and made it into highly productive fields. But he had selected this place long ago because it looked beautiful to him, and he happened to like the way the creek wound through his pasture" (LL 5). In both cases, the Captain, guided by his non-acquisitive disposition, embodies that essential *aesthetic* quality celebrated by Cather as the antithesis of modern bourgeois restlessness: repose. What we are supposed to find beautiful about the Forrester grounds is not the picturesqueness of the pristine landscape itself but the *steadfastness of character* to which that landscape attests, the beauty of the Captain's refusal to follow the rush of a Philistine modernity that defaces anyone and anything for the sake of profit. The same disregard for material wealth allows him to act with repose during the bank failure: "He sent to the vault for his private steel box, opened it in their presence, and sorted the contents on the table." We have here the human equivalent of a

time-worn, rain-battered lighthouse. Through figures like the Captain, Cather aims to captivate readers with an aesthetics of weathered sturdiness. We are being sensitized to the beauty of a shape, of a certain posture or silhouette (one rarely seen, Cather suggests, in twentieth-century America): that of a man standing up for a non-materialistic ideal, for something other than money, whether it be the beauty of nature or the idea that men should “pay their losses like gentlemen.”

This non- or anti-materialism is linked throughout Cather’s fiction to a graceful capacity to endure the reality (or prospect) of loss, a spiritual and mental fortitude diametrically opposed to the modern inability to endure even the inconvenience of boredom. The Captain’s unflustered self-bankruptcy is a narrative device cut from the same cloth as Alexandra’s exquisitely resigned admission, at the end of *O Pioneers!*, that “the land belongs to the future” and she “might as well try to will the sunset ... to [her] brother’s children” (158).<sup>7</sup> Both moments dramatize a pioneer ethos defined by the way one carries oneself in the face of adverse circumstances, actual or imminent. Perhaps nowhere is this criterion of moral and aesthetic judgment so starkly and concisely advanced as in *O Pioneers!*, when Cather’s omniscient narrator declares with maxim-like pithiness: “A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves” (25). A consummate idealist, in other words, a pioneer should be able to *endure* the *unideal*, to persevere through unideal conditions so long as he or she has an ideal to cling to. This is precisely what Captain Forrester does in his noblesse-oblige handling of the bank failure, and many of the early chapters in *O Pioneers!* highlight Alexandra’s multi-year labor of convincing her brothers to remain on

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<sup>7</sup> All quotations from this novel hereafter cited, in-text, with the abbreviation “*OP*.”

their farmland despite its seeming unprofitability. ““But how do you *know* that land is going to go up enough to pay the mortgages,”” her brother Lou asks when she proposes a second mortgage on the homestead (*OP* 34, original emphasis). ““I can’t explain that, Lou,”” Alexandra replies, ““I *know*, that’s all. When you drive about over the country you can feel it coming”” (34, original emphasis). Continuing to have faith in the land is a tall order when everyone else seems inclined to abandon it, but as Alexandra tells her friend Carl, ““I have to keep telling myself what is *going* to happen””: I have to be able to enjoy the *idea* of what the land will become, regardless of what it is now (*OP* 28, emphasis added). Across these sketches, Cather routinely foregrounds the beauty of Alexandra’s embattled resilience. This is often, again, a matter of posing, of capturing her heroine in postures of exquisite resignation and stalwart pensiveness. The day after a heated argument with her brother Oscar about selling the farm, Alexandra is described sitting in a rocking chair with the Bible open on her knees: ““but she was not reading. She was looking thoughtfully away at the point where the upland road disappeared over the rim of the prairie. Her body was in attitude of perfect repose, such as it was apt to take when she was thinking earnestly”” (*OP* 31).

Nowhere is Cather’s aesthetic fixation on stoical idealism more evident, however, than in *Shadows on the Rock*, her fictionalization of the lives of French colonists living in barely settled, seventeenth-century Quebec. Topically and stylistically, *Shadows* is a sister novel to *O Pioneers!* Both texts lack a steadily elaborated plot and revolve, instead, around discontinuous snapshots of white pioneers enduring hardships and deprivation to establish homey footholds in a new world. In the novel’s opening scene, “the last of the summer ships from France” are departing down the St. Lawrence in October, meaning

that it will be nearly a year before Quebec's residents receive either provisions or news again from the Old World (*Shadows on the Rock* 3).<sup>8</sup> The colonists look down from the cape, watching until the receding sails disappear from view, at which point, "they went back to their shops and their kitchens to face the stern realities of life. Now for eight months the French colony on this rock in the North would be entirely cut off from Europe, from the world. ... No supplies; not a cask of wine or a sack of flour .... Not a letter, even—no news of what went on at home" (*SR* 3). The atmosphere of hardship that forms the quintessential backdrop to any of Cather's pioneer novels is thus established in the first few pages, and just as *O Pioneers!* opens with visions of the ominously untamed landscaped, the wilderness looms large in the opening pages of *Shadows*, too, threatening (as Cather put it in *O Pioneers!*) "to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes" (*OP* 8). "[J]ust across from the proud rock of Quebec, the black pine forest came down to the water's edge ... [and] stretched no living man knew how far. ... The forest was suffocation, annihilation; there European man was quickly swallowed up in silence" (*SR* 5-6).

Despite this ominous opening, however, what follows in the next 200 pages are glimpses of Quebec's colonists not just surviving but surviving with a spirit that manages to find comfort and even beauty amidst inhospitable circumstances. True to Catherian form, nothing testifies to the pioneers' graceful resilience so much as an artfully civilized domestic interior: the specter of the suffocating wilderness is quickly eclipsed by images of a cozy home, as apothecary Euclide Auclair, one of the novel's main protagonists, returns to his house after watching the last of the ships. As soon as Euclide steps in his

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations from this novel hereafter cited, in-text, with the abbreviation "*SR*."



door, Cather's narrator embarks on a glowing description of the domestic scene: a living room decorously shut off from the shopfront "by a partition made of shelves and cabinets," "a fire burn[ing] in the fireplace," a "dining-table ... set with a white cloth, silver candlesticks, glasses, and two clear decanters, one of red wine and one of white" (7). From the kitchen at the back of the house, "two pleasant emanations greeted the chemist: the rich odour of roasting fowl, and a child's voice, singing. When he closed the heavy wooden door behind him, the voice called: 'Is it you, Papa?'" (8). Twelve-year-old Cécile, Euclide's daughter, has been preparing her father's dinner, knowing that it is his custom to dine "at six o' clock in winter and seven in summer, ... as he was used to do in Paris" (8). Indeed, "his dinner Auclair regarded as the thing that kept him a civilized man and a Frenchman" (14). *Shadows* thus clearly reprises a theme that Cather was already elaborating 18 years earlier in *O Pioneers!*: the epic feat of establishing on foreign soil a "civilized" order that preserves a sense of the cultural traditions and national identity of the country from which pioneer settlers have come. The homey domestic order of the Auclair household provides a clear fictional instantiation of Cather's maxim that restlessness does not make for beauty: "[o]ther things must come first: good cookery, cottages that are homes, not playthings; ... repose" (*WCIP* 71).

As with Alexandra or Captain Forrester, however, we fail to see the full beauty of the Auclairs' repose if all we see is the beauty of comfort—the *pleasure* created by Cécile doing her homemaking and "doing it well." In order for repose, in a Catherian context, to be appealing, it cannot inhere merely in conditions or postures of ease, making repose synonymous with luxury (with life giving these characters "wages for their toil and a bonus besides"). It must inhere, rather, in conditions or postures of ease *in the midst*

of deprivation and hardship, making repose synonymous with fortitude (with “fac[ing] the stern realities of life” [SR 3]). It is unsurprising, then, that soon after the narrator’s description of the Auclair household, Cather provides readers with a bit of backstory that cuts the aura of cozy contentment with a dose of hardy austerity. This is accomplished by inserting into the narrative, from beyond the grave, the voice of the deceased Madame Auclair, Euclide’s late wife and Cécile’s mother, who died two years before the story’s start. Cécile recalls her mother’s admonishments about housework in the final years of her life:

“After a while, when I am too ill to help you, you will perhaps find it fatiguing to do all these things alone, over and over. But in time you will come to love your duties, as I do. You will see that your father’s whole happiness depends on order and regularity, and you will come to feel a pride in it. Without order our lives would be disgusting, like those of the poor savages. At home, in France, we have learned to do all these things in the best way, and we are conscientious, and that is why we are called the most civilized people in Europe and other nations envy us.”

...

During the last winter of her illness [Madame Auclair] lay much of the time on her red sofa, that had come so far out to this rock in the wilderness. ... [S]he would think fearfully of how much she was entrusting to [Cécile’s] little shingled head; something so precious, so intangible; a feeling about life that had come down to her through so many centuries and that she had brought with her across the wastes of obliterating, brutal ocean. The sense of “our way”—that was what she longed to leave with her daughter. ... The individuality, the character, of M. Auclair’s house, though it appeared to be made up of wood and cloth and glass and a little silver, was really made of very fine moral qualities in two women: the mother’s unswerving fidelity to certain traditions, and the daughter’s loyalty to her mother’s wish. (SR 20-21)

Cather fills out the image of the Auclairs’ reposeful home by clarifying its beauty as a product of discipline. The emphasis on disconnection and severance from the Old World (on the “wastes of the obliterating, brutal ocean”) frames the Auclairs’ domesticity as a precarious and imperiled aesthetic achievement, replacing any misreading of the

household's candlestick, tablecloth, and decanter finery as signs of an indulgent materialism with an appreciation of such artful domestic order as evidence, rather, of a principled *idealism*—of staunch “fidelity” to French “traditions.” As Cather wrote of these colonists in her letter about *Shadows*, “Those people brought a kind of French culture there and somehow kept it alive on that rock, sheltered it and on occasion died for it, as if it really were a sacred fire” (OW 16). Beyond simply praising this pioneer endurance, the sheer extent of Cather's obviously settler-colonial outlook becomes especially clear when she asserts, in the same letter, that such artful, disciplined domesticity was actually *more* essential to the process of frontier settlement than the elimination of indigenous people: “An orderly little French household that went on trying to live decently ... interests me more than Indian raids or the wild life in the forests. ... [O]nce having taken your seat in the close air by the apothecary's fire, you can't explode into military glory .... And really, a new society begins with the salad dressing more than with the destruction of Indian villages” (OW 16).

The destruction of indigenous life and the military glory of white settlers are likewise eclipsed by the quiet wonders of settler endurance in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather's 1927 novel about French-Catholic missionaries spreading their faith in the recently annexed American territory of 1850s New Mexico. Like *O Pioneers!*, *Archbishop* is comprised of a series of chronologically discontinuous vignettes constituting a tableau of its settler protagonist's trials and tribulations. The story of Bishop Jean-Marie Latour founding the first archdiocese in New Mexico includes glimpses of his initial, perilous journey to his desert bishopric, his attempts to corral disobedient, sinful, and power-hungry Mexican priests, his (failed) efforts at converting

local indigenous peoples, and narrowly escaped run-ins with murderous white outlaws. The tonal atmosphere of constantly besetting, ambient hardship that we expect from a Catherian frontier narrative is quickly established in the novel's opening pages, as Latour traverses the harsh desert alone to reach his diocese. "The difficulty," Cather's narrator observes, "was that the country in which he found himself was so featureless": riding through "thirty miles of conical red hills, ... he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare" (17). The Bishop appears lost; his mule is wearied, and he is out of water. But just as *O Pioneers!* opens with vivid descriptions of a harsh and untamed landscape that in fact help to highlight Alexandra's principled endurance, so does *Archbishop*'s opening scene of lethal adversity serve as a contrastive backdrop for Father Latour's humble yet steadfast resilience. Where Alexandra weathers the frontier's harsh material circumstances through the idealism of her faith in the land, Father Latour weathers them through his faith in God, a faith that Cather encodes as an *aesthetic* sensitivity to signs from the Divine: "When he opened his eyes again, his glance immediately fell upon one juniper which differed in shape from the others. It was not a thick-growing cone, but a naked, twisted trunk, ... and at the top it parted into two lateral, flat-lying branches. ... Living vegetation could not present more faithfully the form of the Cross" (18). The Bishop then stops for devotions in the middle of the desert, devotions that "lasted perhaps half an hour, and when he rose he looked refreshed" (19). While pushing on he wonders whether the mere trip to his diocese alone might claim his life, but the mental discipline and spiritual fortitude of his faith gives him the strength he needs, again, to pull through: "He reminded himself of that cry, wrung from his Savior on the Cross, '*J'ai soif!*' Of all our Lord's physical suffering, only one, 'I thirst,' rose to His

lips. Empowered by long training, the young priest blotted himself out of his own consciousness and meditated upon the anguish of his Lord. The Passion of Jesus became for him the only reality; the need of his own body was but a part of that conception” (20).

Cather thus sets the stage and the tone for the rest of her novel with this opening sketch of Latour’s austere, self-abnegating resilience. As novel unfolds, she continues to present Latour in situations and postures that highlight his embattledness and exquisite resignation to the realities and challenges of frontier-based missionary life. Unlike *O Pioneers!* and *Shadows on the Rock*, which revolve entirely around scenes and interactions that take place between white people, *Archbishop* is more frequently structured around interracial encounters, since Latour’s work is to bring the Catholic faith to those in his diocese, especially Mexican and indigenous people. These interracial encounters are still worth discussing, however, as they are a key part of how Cather illustrates her pioneer protagonist’s humble endurance, and like the moment in *Good Morning, Midnight* where Rhys highlights Sasha’s “Angliche,” unemotional response to Serge’s story of the struggling Martiniquan woman, Latour’s encounters with indigenous people are not scenes where the text suddenly “becomes” racial for a moment but scenes where qualities that are in fact racialized throughout the novel become more *overtly* racialized because of an interracial context. In Book of Three of the novel, Latour sets out on a mission to hold a mass at Ácoma Pueblo, an indigenous community cut off from frequent ecclesiastical guidance by its location at the top of an isolated, formidably high mesa. Chronically severed from contact with the Church, the Ácoma people appear to Latour, upon his arrival, as especially impenetrable to Christianization, and Cather’s

portrayal of his visit highlights the feelings of embattled dismay that overwhelm him in the moment:

[H]e had never found it so hard to go through the ceremony of the Mass. Before him, on the grey floor, in the grey light, a group of bright shawls and blankets, some fifty or sixty silent faces; above and beyond them the grey walls. He felt as if he were celebrating Mass at the bottom of the sea, for antediluvian creatures; for types of life so old, so hardened, so shut within their shells, that the sacrifice on Calvary could hardly reach back so far. ... When he blessed them and sent them away, it was with a sense of inadequacy and spiritual defeat. (100)

These are the kinds of situations and affects that Cather's pioneer aesthetics enshrine: the image, the vision, of a pioneer churchman beset by the monumentality of his own evangelical task and fighting to maintain his resolve. All the mention of lighting, of the staging of the scene *as* a scene ("Before him, ... in the grey light ... beyond them they grey walls"), illustrates how much these novels function almost like literary photography, with Cather taking snapshots of pioneers poised in just the right situations to capture their exquisite resilience, their ability to bend and not break in the face of conditions unimaginable to modern bourgeois Americans whose greatest problem is boredom. "He was on a naked rock in the desert, in the stone age," Cather's narrator remarks, putting the scale of Latour's adversities into perspective by narrating them as if Latour himself were looking down on the scene and witnessing his own smallness, "a prey to homesickness for his own kind, his own epoch, for European man and his glorious history of desire and dreams" (103). That Latour ultimately overcomes this sense of "spiritual defeat" is never said in so many words so much as simply implied by the fact that the narrative continues. Right after the lofty, dramatic lines describing Latour stranded "on a naked rock ... in stone age," Cather ends the section by tacking on a jarringly mundane, concluding paragraph: "On his homeward way the Bishop spent

another night with Father Jesus, the good priest at Isleta, who talked with him much of the Moqui country and of those very old rock-set pueblos still farther to the west” (103). The apparent need *not* to make a big deal, narratively speaking, over how or when Latour brought himself out of his Ácoma-induced dismay lends an air of understated epic-ness to this pioneer protagonist’s endurance. It suggests that such formidable experiences and the mental, spiritual, and physical fortitude they demand were such routine parts of Latour’s life on the frontier as to be almost narratively unremarkable. The stoic reserve with which Cather’s narrative touches on Latour’s flash of existential dread then quickly moves on reflects the calm stolidity with which the stalwart Latour would have quietly metabolized and overcome this setback.

Let me stop to reiterate, at this point, that everything I have been describing here should be understood as a set of tropes and storylines racially charged with a tacit nostalgia for forms of whiteness morally and aesthetically superior to that of America’s restless, Philistine, modernized bourgeoisie. Whether we are talking about Captain Forrester, Alexandra, Cécile, Euclide, and Madame Auclair, or Archbishop Jean-Marie Latour, the set of fine moral qualities these pioneers exhibit—hardiness, austerity, discipline, idealism—is, for Cather, something that spoke of race. We know this not from overt references to these characters’ whiteness within the novels but from what we have seen earlier in the discussion of Cather’s nonfiction. Her interviews, speeches, and letters identify America’s “prosperous middle class” rather than “white people” as the explicit targets of her cultural criticism, but this does not mean, of course, that whiteness is irrelevant to an analysis of her cultural anxieties and the literary reflexes they inspired. Both the societal problems Cather was identifying and the escapist literary solutions she

provided center on white people, and her pioneer fictions ensure, however unwittingly, that when faced with industrial capitalism's moral and cultural ramifications, the people and lives we imagine as exemplars of a different and better way of living, of alternative and superior values, practices, and mentalities, are still white people—are the “good” white people rife with courage and honesty and resilience before modernity hit and whiteness “went bad.” Cather’s portrayal of these pioneers should also be understood as what Tuck and Yang call settler moves to innocence: as (aesthetic) positionings of white settlers in situations and postures that depict frontier settlement as a process that *white* people endured. Cather, again, was not writing about the frontier out of a conscious desire to reckon with and pardon white people’s participation in indigenous dispossession and genocide, but settler moves to innocence can be made unwittingly as often as deliberately, and Cather’s fictions effectively rescript the history of frontier settlement by displacing the systemic realities of violent white acquisitiveness with individualistic portraits of noble white embattledness. This representational maneuver inevitably makes her fiction well-poised to alleviate any sense of responsibility or guilt on the part of white readers for acts and histories of settler colonization. Such settler-colonial dynamics and assumptions are the *foundation* for the cultural work done on whiteness by Cather’s fiction: the act of settlement—of establishing residence and some form of European-derived civilizational order on what is imagined as untamed, unowned, and order-less land—is the *stage* on which these white, pioneer virtues play out.

I want to reiterate one other important pattern (or rather tension, as we will see) in the way Cather portrays her white settlers at the level of novelistic content. As my readings of *A Lost Lady*, *Shadows on the Rock*, *O Pioneers!*, and *Archbishop* suggest,



Cather's novels consistently avoid representing her pioneer characters in any kind of materially acquisitive act. The military invasions and treaty betrayals through which French and American whites first gained access to the indigenous lands that eventually became Quebec or Nebraska or New Mexico are not a part of Cather's historical fiction for frank reasons of personal aesthetic philosophy that we have seen ("[R]eally, a new society begins with the salad dressing more than with the destruction of Indian villages"). These larger acts of historical violence and dispossession aside, Cather's pioneers as individuals are also never depicted *in* the business of property accumulation. Euclide Auclair in *Shadows* comes to Quebec with a modicum of wealth already in hand, as the French Count who serves as the administrative and military leader of the colony was already a longtime patron of the Auclair family back in France. The apothecary makes a quiet, simple living throughout novel purveying salves and tinctures to Quebec's ailing residents; desires for more personal property, a bigger home, or the expansion of the colony are topics foreign to his mind. Bishop Latour, as a man of God, is unsurprisingly disinterested in worldly goods, and the cupidity and miserliness of some of the Mexican priests in his diocese are actually presented as some of major irritants in his efforts to gain moral and ecclesiastical control of his frontier bishopric. We know, simply from being told at the level of narration, that Alexandra is a savvy businesswoman with a head for figures, but while Cather alludes to her financial acumen being a saving grace for the family farm, there are never any moments where Alexandra is shown, for instance, negotiating a land deal. Quite literally, as discussed in this chapter's opening, we see her in Book One struggling to keep the property bequeathed to her by her parents, and then, all of a sudden, at the start of Book Two, the novel jumps forward 16 years, and she has

“one of the richest farms on the Divide” (*OP* 43). When Alexandra’s friend Carl returns to Hanover and asks her how she came into such prosperity, Alexandra’s self-effacing, anti-entrepreneurial response provides another clear (and suspiciously sentimental) example of the exquisite spirit of pioneer humility that Cather wants readers to take away from her text: ““We had n’t any of us much to do with it, Carl. The land did it. ... It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still” (*OP* 59). Indeed, Cather not only carefully avoids showing her pioneers in any situations that might make them appear materialistic; she even, as we have seen, goes out of her way to write scenes and dialogue that showcase their *anti*-materialistic tendencies. Captain Forrester’s unwavering willingness to bankrupt himself in order to save his laboring depositors from the greed of up-and-coming young businessmen is the most dramatic example of this. The exquisitely resigned, anti-proprietary humility of Alexandra’s claim, at the end of *O Pioneers!*, that “[t]he land belongs to the future,” and ““the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while,”” is another (*OP* 158).

As I stipulated at the outset of this chapter, however, Cather’s pioneers, though not materialistic, are also not poor, a fact which we have seen now in everything from Alexandra’s big farmhouse to the Forrester estate to the Auclair’s cozy home, complete with candlesticks, tablecloths, and decanters. Cather’s representations of the pioneers are thus riven, at the level of content, with a constant, ongoing tension. She has to make clear that their values and habits are clearly distinguishable from those of the modern bourgeoisie, and she thus minimizes the extent to which they are depicted in acts of land

and wealth accumulation and highlights their readiness to lose assets for the sake of principle ideals. As a consummately bourgeois artist, however—one whose gripe with the modern bourgeoisie is not so much their wealth as their Philistinism—she also cannot imagine poverty as an environment hospitable to art and thus has to *balance* a mood or spirit of ascetic idealism with some degree of material comfort. The ascetic idealism I hope, by now, to have illustrated. I want to wrap up this discussion of Cather's novelistic content by illustrating the opposing class conservatism that permeates her texts, her inability to imagine moral uprightness and aesthetic beauty outside the material parameters of bourgeois domesticity. Any of the previously discussed novels could serve this purpose. We have witnessed the loving attention Cather bestows to Alexandra's big farmhouse. Captain Forrester, humble and generous as he is, is wealthy enough to have a sprawling estate that one enters through a tree-lined "private lane" leading to the moat-like feature of a creek, covered by a "stout wooden road-bridge" and winding around the "foot of the hill on which the house sat" (*LL* 4-5, 4, 5). Even *Archbishop* includes, alongside its myriad scenes of harrowing journeys up cragged mesas and down steep arroyos, a whole section devoted to depicting Bishop Latour and his vicar Father Joseph Vaillant sitting down, in the Bishop's lodgings on Christmas Day, peppered with details that hint at the tiny bubble of decorum and civility that these pioneer churchmen have managed to preserve in a desert frontier: there are "candlesticks over the fireplace"; Father Joseph "had tucked a napkin over the front of his cassock"; there is even a bottle of red wine that the vicar had noticed and "'begged'" from a "'hacienda'" where he was performing a baptism (though it seems there is a "'slight taste of cork'" because the

Mexican parishioners, Father Joseph observes, “do not know how to keep [wine] properly”) (38, 40).

The most vivid examples of Cather’s enduringly bourgeois leanings, however, appear in *Shadows on the Rock*. One of the book’s minor characters is an intrepid frontiersman named Pierre Charron, a “hero of the fur trade,” who spends much of his time in the woods (SR 137). “[Q]uick as an otter,” bedecked in “buckskins, with a quick swinging step,” Charron comes *close* to a Catherian version of James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo: “To both Auclair and [the late] Madame Auclair, Pierre Charron had seemed the type they had come so far to find; more than anyone else he realized the romantic picture of the free Frenchman of the great forests” (SR 139). Yet unlike Cooper’s Leatherstocking, who has essentially abandoned civilized society for a nomadic existence with the last of the Mohicans, Cather’s frontiersman maintains close ties to Quebec society, which he considers home, and has not so thoroughly shed his European features: “He had the good manners of the Old World, the dash and daring of the New” (SR 139). Charron is a close friend of the Auclair family, and on one of his returns to the colony from the woods, he drops in to see Euclide and Cécile. He also has business visiting a friend named Jean-Baptiste Harnois nearby on the Île d’Orléans, and since Cécile had always dreamed of going to that island in the St. Lawrence, Charron agrees to take her with him for his three-day visit. Everything goes well at first. Cécile revels in the fields, “pick[ing] wild strawberries” and enjoying the sight of “daisies” and “marshy hollows” “thatched over buttercups” (SR 153). But the mood of the visit shifts when night falls, and it is time to head indoors. The Harnois family, it turns out, are poor farmers living in a cramped, dirty home with no decorum or manners. When showing Cécile their

pigs and geese, the family's four young daughters "kept telling her about peculiarities of animal behaviour which she thought it better taste to ignore" (*SR* 154). "[T]he kitchen where they ate was hot and very close," and worst of all was bedtime, for Cécile finds out that she must share the same bed in which all four Harnois daughters sleep (*SR* 154). "When they kicked off their moccasins, they did not stop to wash their legs, which were splashed with the mud of the marsh and bloody from mosquito bites. One candle did not give much light, but Cécile saw that they must have gone to bed unwashed for many nights in these same sheets" (*SR* 154). As Cécile tries, unsuccessfully to fall asleep, she remembers, unsurprisingly, "how her mother had always made everything at home beautiful, just as here everything about cooking, eating, sleeping, [and] living, seemed repulsive" (*SR* 155). Cécile lies awake all night, and the visit is cut short when she privately begs Charron to take her home the next day.

There is nothing in the narrator's commentary during or after this episode that suggests readers should be in any way critical of Cécile's discretely expressed yet unambiguous class disgust. Her instinctive revulsion from people and places that lack the order and resources for proper repose mark her as a typical Cather focalizer, and Cather minimizes the potentially off-putting effects of her protagonist's class condescension by including various examples, from the start of the novel, of how the Auclairs try to spread their wealth by using their own resources to tend to the less fortunate. Euclide and Cécile often take care, for instance, of a disabled pauper named Blinker who is ostracized by other members of the colony due to his physical deformities but whom the apothecary and his daughter offer food and occasional shelter in exchange for menial labor around their house. They also take care of a young boy named Jacques Gaux, whose mother

works in an inn that is clearly implied to be a brothel and who has neither the time nor the motherly instincts to look after her son. Jacques and Cécile, being of similar ages, are close friends, and Cather devotes Book Three of the novel to fleshing out their relationship, one in which the Auclair's property plays a crucial part, specifically a single piece of dishware:

[Cécile] had a silver cup with a handle; on the front was engraved a little wreath of roses, and inside that wreath was the name, "*Cécile*," cut in the silver. Her Aunt Clothilde had given it to her [back in France] when she was but a tiny baby, so it had been hers all her life. That was what seemed so wonderful to Jacques. His clothes had always belonged to somebody else before they were made over for him; he slept wherever there was room for him, sometimes with his mother, sometimes on a bench. He had never had anything of his own [...]. But to have a little cup, with your name on it ... even if you died, it would still be there, with your name.

More than the shop with all the white jars and mysterious implements, more than the carpet and curtains and the red sofa, that cup fixed Cécile as born to security and privileges. He regarded it with respectful, wistful admiration. ... [H]e liked to hold it and trace with his finger-tips the letters that made it so peculiarly and almost sacredly hers. Since his attention was evidently fixed upon her cup, more than once Cécile had suggested that he drink his chocolate from it, and she would use another. But he shook his head, unable to explain. That was not at all what her cup meant to him. Indeed, Cécile could not know what it meant to him; she was too fortunate. (SR 70)

This is one of the most vivid examples of Cather, class-wise, trying to have her cake and eat it, too. On the one hand, she acknowledges that Cécile is a "fortunate" child, enjoying "securit[ies] and privileges" hardly typical of life on the frontier. Jacques' field of vision thus includes "the carpet and curtains and red sofa" that attest to a well-off home. On the other hand, in addition to warding off any critique or resentment of the Auclair's "privileges" by showing how they use their resources to care for others, Cather also manages to blot out *most* of our vision of Euclide and Cécile's material comforts by whittling down our focus to one object: a cup—a nice cup, but a cup nonetheless. By

dipping momentarily into Jacques' perspective, Cather imbues the passage with an air of humble appreciation for the small things. Though Jacques is not the main focalizer of the text, we know that Cécile *does* appreciate the cozy home she enjoys based on her reaction to the Harnois family's sordid living conditions, so Jacques' near-religious reverence for her cup reads, tonally, as a part of the overarching spirit of pioneer humility the novel aims to convey to modern American readers, a capacity to find contentment and beauty in the grip of environments and circumstances unimaginable to the modern bourgeoisie. The passage reveals how much that vision of "[a]n orderly little French household that went on trying to live decently" in the midst of the wilderness (the vision that interested Cather "more than Indian raids or the wild life in the forests") revolves around the assumption of *some* property, some nice property, even if the vision as a whole militates against excessive property accumulation and valorizes principled idealism over petty materialism.

We have taken a thorough look, by now, at the affective and ideological dimensions of how Cather represents her pioneers at the level of narrative content. I now want to call attention to Cather's narrative form and consider how her stylistic maneuvers enhance the racially charged portrayals of white settlers within her fiction. There are a few different ways in which Cather's literary form works to buttress her texts' atmosphere of nostalgic escape to exquisitely resilient, spartan forms of whiteness. The first of these pertains to the fragmentary, discontinuous nature of her storytelling. As I have already noted a few times over the course of this chapter, Cather often uses sudden jump cuts to move from one section of a novel to the next, transitions that often skip over large chunks of time in the turning of a page. *O Pioneers!*, for example, is broken into

five Parts, and Cather's formal techniques are most evident in each Part's opening paragraph. We have already seen the first lines of Part I: "One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying to not to be blown away" (*OP* 3). Cather introduces the novel's main characters and then describes the conditions of the Bergson household during Alexandra's childhood, particularly her father's failing health. Even within Part I, however, Cather already begins to employ time-skipping jumps. Each of the novel's five Parts is further subdivided into separately numbered sections. Section II of Part I is where Cather first describes Alexandra's ailing father and sketches his background. Two pages later, Section III of Part I suddenly begins with the sentence, "One Sunday afternoon in July, six months after John Bergson's death, Carl was sitting in the doorway of the Linstrum kitchen" (17). A few more pages later, Section IV begins, "For the first three years after John Bergson's death, the affairs of his family prospered. Then came the hard times that brought every one on the Divide to the brink of despair" (25). This pattern of chronological leapfrogging continues throughout the novel and finds its most extreme manifestation in the opening lines of Part II: "It is sixteen years since John Bergson died. His wife now lies beside him, and the white shaft that marks their graves gleams across the wheat-fields" (39). The narrative fast forwards over a decade, and perhaps because of the extremity of this particular jump, the narrator calls more attention to it than usual via the temporary shift to the present tense. Cather's style signals a conscious, meta-fictional awareness of the reader's positioning outside the story: no effort is made to hide the fact that the listening audience needs to be caught up on events that have since been glossed over. After arresting the narrative pace to resituate readers within this new time frame,



Part II goes on to introduce more characters, walk us through Alexandra's big farmhouse, and hint at Emil and Marie's burgeoning romance, before Cather pulls us out of the story once again and launches us even further into the future with the opening lines of Part III: "Winter has settled down over the Divide again; the season in which Nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring" (*OP* 97).

The different parts of the novel are thus separated by significant chronological gaps, ones that Cather bridges with very simple, one might even say understated or unbothered jump cuts, occasionally followed by a zoomed-out repositioning of the reader's eye. Though especially prominent in *O Pioneers!* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, this elliptical structure holds true across Cather's frontier narratives, and critics have identified the narrative gaps that appear throughout Cather's novels as key elements of her modernist style. Jo Ann Middleton calls them "vacuoles," borrowing a term from cell biology, where it describes empty spaces within a cell that are in fact crucial to maintaining the cell's structure and performing certain life-sustaining functions. In the case of Cather's fiction, these vacuoles could be "a thirteen-year space between parts of a work," like the giant gap of space between Parts I and II of *O Pioneers!*, or just "an unexpected space between scenes," like the description of Latour's epic feelings of failure and existential dread after his mass at Ácoma suddenly followed by Cather concluding the section by telling us that, on the way home, Latour visited a local priest who told him about another area of the nearby country (Middleton 56). In each case, Cather's vacuoles are "structural absences that, in fact, allow for a fuller story than should be technically possible" (Middleton 55). This is because one of their

predominant functions, in Middleton's reading, is to elicit reader response and emotional investment. These narrative gaps beckon to be filled by the reader's imagination, whether this means envisioning scenes of life that would have transpired in the 16 years glossed over in one of Cather's narrative transitions or conjecturing about the details of a scene whose contents are clearly crucial to the plot but that Cather has elected not depict (e.g., what character *x* said to or did with character *y* that has led to a change we are now seeing in the next part of the story Cather *has* represented). By filling the vacuoles with their own visions and interpretations, "readers are drawn into the poetic creation" (Middleton 60). Middleton bases this argument on the very correct observation that literary style, for Cather, was always a matter of a) emotional effect and b) simplification—the latter being crucial to the former. "The higher processes of art," Cather wrote in "The Novel Demeublé," "are all processes of simplification" (49). "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there – that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, ... the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself" (Cather, "The Novel Demeublé" 50).

Middleton's claims about the imagination-sparking role of Cather's vacuoles are thus well-founded and an excellent way of describing the aesthetic purpose and effect of Cather's narrative gaps. I would argue, though, that as regards her novels of frontier life and the capacity of her pioneer characters to read as foils to America's restless and spoiled modern bourgeoisie, Cather's discontinuous, elliptical narrative form serves another, more important effect. By frequently jumping forward months, years, or even

decades into a pioneer character's life and by enacting these narrative jumps with minimal narrative commentary, Cather adopts a novelistic form maximally suited to highlighting the pioneers' defining trait of steadfast endurance. To some extent, this a very straightforward claim: if you want to portray a set of characters in a way that foregrounds and valorizes their indefatigable mettle and resilience, pick an economical form that allows you to telescope large swatches of historical time and lived experience into a small amount of narrative space, to maximize the amount of stuff you can show your characters enduring. The time-lapse, collage-like nature of Cather's pioneer fictions—their juxtaposition of various snapshots of adversity taken at disparate moments over the course of a character's life—facilitates a very holistic reading experience: what ultimately stands out is not the content of any individual episode so much as the overall fact of the pioneer hero or heroine's *having abided* through them all.

In addition, however, to this very straightforward technique of telescoping decades' or even a lifetime's worth of challenges into what are in fact rather short novels, Cather's elliptical narrative form also highlights the pioneers' spartan austerity and fortitude in a more nuanced, tone-based way. By enacting her elliptical transitions in ways that offer minimal commentary on the events we are leaving behind—ways that do not dwell on whatever hardship may have just been depicted—Cather exudes, at the level of form, the kind of phlegmatic, resilient stolidity being celebrated as a character trait at the level of content. I am thinking here particularly of the passage briefly discussed above, describing Bishop Latour after his failed mass at Ácoma. I will reproduce it here, as a reminder, in full:

He was on a naked rock in the desert, in the stone age, a prey to homesickness for his own kind, his own epoch, for European man and his glorious history of desire and dreams. Through all the centuries that his own part of the world had been changing like the sky at daybreak, this people had been fixed, increasing neither in number nor desires, rock-turtles on their rock. Something reptilian he felt here, something that had endured by immobility, a kind of life out of reach, like the crustaceans in their armor.

On his homeward way the Bishop spent another night with Father Jesus, the good priest at Isleta, who talked with him much of the Moqui country and of those very old rock-set pueblos still farther to the west. (103)

That is the end of Section III of Book Three of the novel. Cather's almost immediate, unfazed transition from Latour's epic feelings of loneliness and dread to a concluding paragraph that essentially reads, "And then he went home and heard about x along the way," performs, at the level of prose style, a striking capacity to metabolize extreme adversity, one that speaks to and reinforces our sense of this virtue as a quality in our protagonist. Cather was in fact quite explicit about this aspect of her narrative form. In the same letter to *The Commonweal* magazine where Cather identified Latour's "well-bred and distinguished" disposition as "something that spoke of race," she also explained the reasoning and motivations behind *Archbishop*'s form (OW 9).

I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of a legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment. ... In the Golden Legend [a collection of medieval hagiographies by Jacobus de Varagine] the martyrdoms of the saints are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their lives; it is as though all human experiences, measured against one supreme spiritual experience, were of about the same importance. The essence of such writing is not to hold the note, not to use an incident for all there is in it – but to touch and pass on. I felt that such writing would be a kind of discipline in these days when the "situation" is made to count for so much ... , when the general tendency is to force things up. In this kind of writing the mood is the thing .... What I got from Father Machebeuf's letters [the French Catholic missionary who served as the inspiration for Latour's vicar, Father Joseph Vaillant] was the mood, the spirit in which they accepted the accidents and hardships of a desert country, the joyful energy that kept them going. (OW 9-10)

“[T]o touch and pass on”—that is the stylistic technique on display in sudden transitions like the one between Latour’s moment of agony about the evangelistically impenetrable Ácoma “rock-turtles” and the info he then hears from another priest “[o]n his homeward way”—*or* in the serial visions of agricultural and financial hardship that Cather provides in the first fifty or so pages of *O Pioneers!*, strung along with the help of time-lapse jumps of six months or three or sixteen years. It is a formal technique specifically designed, as she attests, to convey “the mood”—the exquisitely resigned “spirit”—in which these pioneers “accepted the accidents and hardships” of frontier life. Cather’s use of the word “discipline” in describing these stylistic maneuvers is of course telling, as is her use of that term as a point of contrast for aesthetics tastes and tendencies “these days” in the early twentieth century. The discipline of her restrained style—necessitated by the mood or spirit of disciplined hardihood she is attempting to capture—serves as a foil to the forms of writing popular in her own moment, where the tendency “is to force things up” in a way that caters (I would argue, based on Cather’s other nonfiction comments) to the tastes of a modern American bourgeoisie seeking immediate gratification and alleviation of boredom.

There are two other aspects of Cather’s literary form that warrant commentary here. The first of these pertains to the aura of unbridgeable historical distance in which Cather shrouds her pioneer characters. Consider the following passage from *A Lost Lady*, where Captain Forrester, at the request of a guest at one of his dinner parties, tells us about his backstory. I want to call attention in particular, here, to Cather’s use of direct versus indirect discourse:

[H]e came West a young boy ... and took a job as driver for a freighting company that carried supplies across the plains from Nebraska City to Cherry Creek, as Denver was then called. The freighters, after embarking in that sea of grass six hundred miles in width, lost all count of the days of the week and the month. One day was like another, and all were glorious; good hunting, plenty of antelope and buffalo ....

“An ideal life for a young man,” the Captain pronounced. Once, when he was driven out of the trail by a wash-out, he rode south on his horse to explore, and found an Indian encampment near the Sweet Water, on this very hill where his house now stood. He was, he said, “greatly taken with the location,” and made up his mind that he would one day have a house there. ... He went away and did not come back for many years; he was helping to lay the first railroad across the plains.

“There were those that were dependent on me,” he said. “I had sickness to contend with, and responsibilities. But in all those years I expect there was hardly a day passed that I did not remember the Sweet Water and this hill. When I came here a young man, I had planned it in my mind, pretty much as it is today; where I would dig my well, and where I would plant my grove and my orchard. ...

“When things looked most discouraging,” he went on, “I came back here [at] once and bought the place from the railroad company.” (*LL* 42-43)

Let me insert a few brief notes about this passage’s content before discussing its formal features. In concert with the racially charged class representations of the pioneer’s elucidated throughout this chapter, the Captain’s backstory, first, noticeably dissociates him from the vulgar pursuit of material profit by implying that he worked for the railroad on the frontier not with an intent to get rich but simply out of a need for honest work and an intrepid love for the great outdoors. In addition to this maneuver, the passage stands as a perfect example and reminder of how Cather’s pioneer fictions deploy unwitting and white settler moves to innocence. Life on the barely settled frontier of the American Midwest is made into the nostalgic theater for the expression of Captain Forrester’s pioneer virtues: the patient endurance and ascetic idealism with which he weathered “sickness” and “responsibilities” and deferred but never gave up on his dream of a home on Sweet Water hill. The condition of possibility for painting Captain Forrester in

this noble light is the taking for granted of settler access to the land on which he worked and lives: what happened to the “Indian encampment” that was present when the Captain first arrived as well as how the railroad company came to possess that land over time are never addressed in the text. Indeed, Cather’s moves to innocence not only erase local histories of indigenous dispossession but even figure her robust, non-materialistic pioneer *settler* as the one who was really dispossessed by the ravages of settler-colonial, capitalist modernization. Here are the final lines of the Captain’s backstory: “‘We dreamed the railroad across the mountains, just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water. All these things will be everyday facts to the coming generation, but to us—’ Captain Forrester ended with a sort of grunt. Something foreboding had come into his voice, the lonely, defiant note that is so often heard in the voices of old Indians” (LL 45). Cather draws on the trope of the vanishing Indian only to transmute it into the trope of the vanishing pioneer, the noble frontiersman whose austere, disciplined idealism was once the sine qua non of whiteness but has since been eclipsed by “the coming generation” of restless, spoiled bourgeois Americans.

Returning to the point at hand: the passage’s formal structure—as well as that of the “vanishing pioneer” coda just cited—is marked by a careful interplay between direct and indirect discourse, one that keeps the Captain and his voice irreducibly *removed* from us. Starting from “[H]e came West as a young boy,” we are clearly supposed to read the ensuing paragraphs as if the Captain was telling us all of this himself—and we have, in our minds, a dinner-party scene in which he *is* saying these words to his guests. But rather than Cather quoting the Captain directly, maximizing his voice within the narrative fabric, she shrouds him in an aura of unapproachable distance or inaccessibility by

repackaging his words and relaying them to the reader through the interceding medium of her omniscient narrator's indirect discourse. The entire first paragraph is told without direct speech from the Captain. In the second paragraph, Cather includes two brief snatches of his voice (““An ideal life for a young man”” and ““greatly taken with the location””) amongst what remains a paragraph overwhelming delivered through her narrator's indirect speech. Eventually, Cather gives us a paragraph fully composed of the Captain's direct speech, but by then, the first two paragraphs have already established a highly nostalgic and wistful tone, one that underscores the Captain's distance from us as modern readers by minimizing the extent to which we can hear his voice in the prose. Cather's stylistic techniques, in other words, literally foreground our reliance on the devices of fiction for access to the Captain as a historical figure (and thus how lost to us, in reality, he really is). It is almost as if he is not really or fully there, as if, despite being physically present in the scene, he is fading from view, receding from earshot, because he literally belongs to a different time, a point affirmed by the vanishing-pioneer coda, comprised of an incomplete fragment of speech from the Captain swallowed up by the redface vision of him as a “lonely ... old Indian[.]”—The Last of the Pioneers.

I emphasize the aura of historical distance in which Cather shrouds her pioneer settlers because I would argue that this is a formal and stylistic feature of her writing that enhances the self-avowedly escapist effect of her texts. This is a somewhat counter-intuitive claim. One might argue that a work of historical fiction provides more of an escape for modern readers the more deeply and consistently it immerses them in the lives and voices of its bygone or vanishing characters. Perhaps this is true, and we would do well to remember that significant portions of Cather's pioneer novels do work in this



way, setting us down in the day-to-day lives of the white missionaries, homesteaders, and colonists she depicts. But I would argue that the escapist effect of such fictions is further enhanced rather than undercut by aesthetic maneuvers that routinely refuse or limit our access to the characters being depicted, because this sense of unbridgeable distance between reader and characters serves to remind us how distant from our own *present* the content of the story really is—*so* distant as to be, in some respect, irretrievable, unrepresentable in full. Visiting a complete replica of some ancient structure or person would certainly allow a modern-day tourist to feel transported to a distant past, to feel removed from the present. But so would standing amongst ruins: knowing that you are in the presence of something so foreign and lost to the contemporary moment that you can only experience it now in fragments.

And speaking of fragments, it is not just through carefully managed proportions of direct and indirect speech that Cather manages to veil her pioneers in an aura of unbridgeable distance: the discontinuous, elliptical form of her narratives described above also contributes to this effect. The jumpy, time-lapse transitions she builds into her novels along with their accompanying shifts in narrative tense and scale routinely work to jar readers *out* of the realm of the everyday lives of her characters. Yes: when we are in the thick of a certain Part or Book in one of her fictions, we are generally immersed in the day-to-day lives of her pioneer characters. We see Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant traveling throughout the diocese, Alexandra visiting the farms of her friends or vice-versa, Cécile playing with Jacques or practicing her arts of domestic economy. But as I have shown, Cather's works are often punctuated by jarring, inter-Part or inter-Book transitions that zoom out considerably from the level of everyday life and sometimes

even drop the default storytelling past tense for present-tense narration that places readers in a different time-space (“Winter has settled down over the Divide again; the season in which Nature recuperates ...” [OP 97]). These moments constantly remind us of our *remove* from Cather’s pioneers. They create the impression that our default positioning as readers is not that of being on the ground, constantly right next to these characters, so much as that of time-traveling tourists: we hover over this panorama of pioneer life, flown in for a closer look here and there by a ghost-of-frontier’s-past narratorial guide (“If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra Bergson’s big house, you will find that it is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort”). This narrative structure interrupts any sustained sense of immediate proximity to the pioneers being depicted, creating a sense of the past so foreign to modern America that it cannot be communicated through a continuous narrative form and has to be rendered, instead, through the literary version of an epic frieze—a succession of juxtaposed vignettes capturing these historical figures in positions and postures that speak to the “hardihood of spirit” of a bygone era (“something that spoke of race”) (OW 10, 7). “It is hard to state that feeling in language,” Cather noted, speaking of the spirit of “pious resignation” she imagined “among the country people and the nuns” in *Shadows*: “it was more like an old song, incomplete but uncorrupted .... I took the incomplete air and ... tried to develop it into a prose composition not too conclusive, not too definite: a series of pictures remembered rather than experienced” (OW 15).

I have pointed out throughout this chapter that Cather’s pioneer fictions meticulously avoid depicting white settlers in concrete acts of capital accumulation, a crucial representational pattern that helps to construct her pioneers as anti-materialistic

figures whose lack of attachment to wealth and prosperity distinguishes them from the contemporary American bourgeoisie. We might note, as a final formal feature of Cather's texts, that the discontinuous, elliptical structure of her novels also serves to reflect, at the level of form, the anti-acquisitiveness or highly limited acquisitiveness that is such an important part of her stories' content. We have heard the extent to which Cather viewed the mass consumerism of early-twentieth-century America as a moral and aesthetic problem. I have also pointed out, however, that Cather cannot imagine aesthetically and morally appealing lives without a certain minimum of material, domestic comfort. The pioneers idolized in her fiction are definitely not subsistence farmers. Whether it is a big farmhouse or a nice silver cup, *some* degree of accumulated property is a prerequisite for being enshrined in her fiction because the anti-Philistine yet enduringly bourgeois Cather wants to escape to memories of white people who display *both* a set of rustic, economically coded virtues such as disciplined austerity and the capacity to endure hardship *and* a certain level of highly classed orderliness and decorum that marks them as being "civilized" despite living on the edges of white civilization. In order to tell the story of these limitedly accumulative pioneers, Cather adopts a literary form that reflects the desire for a middle ground between no accumulation and too much accumulation: her stories progress, but only so much.<sup>9</sup> History goes forward in inconsistent lurches, but the material circumstances of characters like the Auclairs or Bishop Latour do not really change. The biggest exception to this rule is Alexandra, who experiences considerable upward mobility over the course of *O Pioneers!* However, that upward mobility is qualified, as I pointed out, by numerous details suggesting that Alexandra *herself* has not

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<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Jed Esty for calling my attention to this feature of Cather's form.

changed despite the prosperity she has come to enjoy. The rooms of her house are unevenly furnished, as if she does not know what to do with all the space, and by the end of the novel, she is diminishing her own proprietorship by insisting that “[t]he land belongs to the future” and that individual settlers only ever own it “for a little while” (*OP* 158). Any sense of Alexandra undergoing a consistent developmental arc over the course of the story is also severely undercut by the fact that Cather places her heroine’s entrance into prosperity very early in the text. Alexandra comes into possession of her big farmhouse at the beginning of Part II of a five-Part novel, meaning that nearly four-fifths of the book revolves around depictions not of her accumulating property so much as merely maintaining the property she already has. As stated at the outset of this chapter, in Cather’s novels, we do not find white settlers who explore and conquer or claim and enclose. Rather, we find passive pioneers, who simply abide over the course of narratives that depict many a trial and tribulation without really “going” anywhere. This is an ideal, reposeful narrative form for conveying a historical mood or spirit of sparingly accumulative austerity, which functions as a key contrast point, for Cather, to modern America’s spoiled, restless, mass-consumer bourgeoisie.

To be sure, this argument relies on a willingness to read Cather’s form metaphorically, since it transposes two different registers of “accumulation.” The pioneers’ austere, ascetically idealistic disinterestedness in property accumulation is reflected by a form that lacks any steady accumulation of causally linked narrative events—a form without a clear trajectory of plot development. The minimal narrative development occurring at the level of form thus mirrors the minimal economic development occurring at the level of content. To phrase this link between narrative,

history, and economics a little differently, we might say, finally, that Cather's barely progressing storylines serve to narrate whiteness in a way that stops before the twentieth century, before the austere, hardy, principled whiteness of the pioneers developed, economically, into the restless, trifling, materialistically Philistine whiteness of America's modern bourgeoisie.<sup>10</sup> This is true on a literal level, given that *O Pioneers!*, *A Lost Lady*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are all set in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, and *Shadows on the Rock* is set in 1697. But beyond simply setting these novels far enough back in the past, Cather also structures them in ways that limit how far forward, toward the twentieth century, they advance.<sup>11</sup>

In all of these ways, the formal qualities of Cather's novels work to enhance the racially charged, affective and ideological dimensions of her nostalgic representations of white pioneers. Her discontinuous, elliptical narrative form telescopes as many visions of adversity and exquisite resignation into her short texts as possible; shrouds her noble pioneers in a mystical, alluring aura of irreducible distance; and minimizes the extent to which accumulation, narrative or economic, features prominently within her texts. These techniques allow each novel to function like a kind of secular Stations of the Cross, a Pioneer's Via Crucis, stringing together various glimpses of endured losses and hardships meant, collectively, to inspire respect and fondness for a spirit of non-acquisitive hardihood that had disappeared, in Cather's eyes, from the cultural wasteland of commercialized, late-industrial, twentieth-century America. In wistfully highlighting the austere moral and economic virtues of bygone white pioneers, Cather's frontier fictions

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<sup>10</sup> I am indebted, again, to Jed Esty for the phrasing of this point.

<sup>11</sup> If one were looking for an example of Cather narrating whiteness *into* its moral and aesthetic degradation in the early twentieth century, the best example would be the character of Rosamond Marsellus (née St. Peter) in *The Professor's House* (1925).

provided a racial escape from the disheartening spectacle of modern American bourgeois whiteness. This escape takes for granted and reifies the settler-colonial dispossession of indigenous people, the long-gone or rapidly vanishing “Indians” who occasionally pop up in Cather’s texts in the politically defanged form of an unearthed pottery shard or as an impenetrable wall of primitivist paganism whose main narrative purpose is to exemplify the kinds of difficulties faced by a white pioneer missionary. The land violently wrested from indigenous people is the literal ground on which Cather’s virtuous, innocent, white pioneer figures stand out. This settler-colonially grounded form of white racial discourse has yet to be fully registered in discussions of her work.

### III

“We provide this framework,” write Tuck and Yang of settler moves to innocence, “so that we can be more impatient with each other, less likely to accept gestures and half-steps, and more willing to press for acts which unsettle innocence” (10). I hope this chapter’s reading of Cather helps to shift scholarly conversations about her work at least somewhat in this direction, illuminating and unsettling the not only settler but *white* settler moves to innocence that haunt her pioneer aesthetics. This has always been an urgent critical task, and it remains so today, for Cather’s readers—both scholarly and non-scholarly—continue to write about her work in ways that obscure its implication in forms of both settler colonialism and white racial identity in order to memorialize her status as the literary chronicler of an inspiringly humble, rustic, multicultural America. I want to conclude by providing two brief, contemporary examples of discussions or memorializations of Cather fiction that this chapter works against, discussions of her

work and legacy that read her novels (however unconsciously) as relatively or completely innocent of settler-colonial dynamics and racial conservatism.

In September of 2017, an article appeared in *The New Yorker* about the opening of the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud, Nebraska, “a seven-million-dollar facility with a climate-controlled archive, apartments for scholars, museum exhibits, and a bookstore,” designed to complement the “six-hundred-acre parcel of land called the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie” (Ross). The article describes Cather as a writer with “enormous empathy for the natural world” and “a complex understanding of American identity,” one whose “symphonic landscapes are inflected with myriad accents, cultures, [and] personal narratives” and whose West is a place where “women achieve independence from restrictive roles; people of many countries coexist; and violence is futile, with guns most often fired in suicidal despair” (Ross). Violence, of course, was not futile, at least insofar as the dispossession of indigenous people is concerned, and as I have pointed out in this chapter, Cather scholars have routinely noted that the people of “many countries” coexisting in her fiction are mostly just white people of a few Northern- and Western- European ethnicities. Toward the end of article, there is one paragraph that makes what Tuck and Yang might call a “half-step” toward unsettling the innocence of Cather’s fiction: “One troubling aspect of Cather’s prairie narratives,” the author concedes, “is that Native Americans scarcely appear in them,” an erasure that “is, on reflection, outrageous” (Ross). This admission, however, is immediately followed by what would seem to be intended as an attenuating counterexample: “In ‘Archbishop,’ however, reverence for the land predates the white invaders. Cather comments that Indians have no desire to master nature, instead ‘accommodating themselves to the scene

in which they found themselves.” The reductive representation of indigenous people as passive, ecological stewards thus supposedly balances out their erasure in other narratives.<sup>12</sup> The same paragraph ends with a description of the Navajo character of Eusabio in *Archbishop*, who visits Latour on his deathbed in a scene at the end of the novel glossed, in *The New Yorker* article, as Eusabio taking on “the aspect of the figure of Death” and coming “to take the Bishop away—not in retribution but in reconciliation” (Ross). The loving, interracial friendship between a Native American leader and a white missionary settler is exactly the type of aesthetic trope that, for non-indigenous readers, “relieve[s] ... feelings of guilt or responsibility [for settler colonialism] without giving up land or power or privilege” (Tuck and Yang 10).

What this *New Yorker* article really captures, I would argue, is the famously tranquil, I would even say tranquilizing nature of Cather’s fiction, its proficiency at evoking transcendently placid, oceanic feelings: “When you walk the Cather Prairie, you move not only backward in time but also out into symbolic terrain, one in which the self becomes a ‘something,’ in which a moment of supreme bliss is indistinguishable from death” (Ross). Especially though not solely for twenty-first-century readers who have lived modernized, fast-paced, over-stimulated lives, Cather’s fiction can feel like a much-needed sensory deprivation tank, stripping away the morass of the urban rat race and steeping one in visions of life more contented with bare essentials. Her novels often exude a calming, therapeutic atmosphere, somewhat sad in its spirit of resignation to

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<sup>12</sup> Knee-jerk, stereotyped understandings of indigenous people as ecological stewards (an aestheticization that often denies various modern and economic dimensions of their identity) have been a key part of how settler colonialism operates under contemporary, environmentally conscious yet still capitalist neoliberalism. See, for example, Colville Confederated Tribes scholar Dina Gilio-Whitaker’s “The Problem With The Ecological Indian Stereotype” and Zapotec scholar Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez’s *Indigenous Encounters with Neoliberalism: Place, Women, and the Environment in Canada and Mexico*.



harsh circumstances yet also peacefully reassuring in the same vein. Her scenes of rustic, simpler times, of sturdiness and moral integrity, generate feelings and images that many of us would love to be able to associate with the landscapes, origins, and forebearers of our nation. The problem occurs when getting lost in such feelings and in the gorgeously simple, pared-back language used to express them, reifies settler presence and dispossessive violence. Thus, in *The New Yorker* article: “Cather can get dangerously close to blood-and-soil lingo, as when *Antonia*’s strapping sons are compared to ‘the founders of early races.’ But her conviction that the land belongs to no one—‘We come and go, but the land is always here,’ Alexandra says—undercuts any tendency toward nationalism and tribalism” (Ross). That Alexandra’s conviction undercuts tendencies toward *white* nationalism is heartening; that its sentimentalized notions of belonging and land ownership simultaneously undercut *indigenous* nationalisms should give us pause.

This smitten piece of reportage about a new development in the academic and touristic Cather industry is actually less distressing than one of the recent pieces of scholarship published on her work. In a 2016 article titled “Suffering with Willa Cather,” William E. Cain sets out on the (somewhat belletristic) mission to identify “what it is in her writing that makes Cather special and that leads readers to respond to her with such a heartfelt sense of connection and esteem” (289). As his title suggests, Cain ultimately argues that the root of Cather’s wide appeal is her writing’s central focus on “suffering—the disappointment, hurt, and sorrow in the soul, and the imperative for men and women to make the most of life despite suffering’s abiding presence in it” (289). Cain takes this argument one step further by suggesting that “Cather is not only an exceptional writer but also a major blues artist,” backing this claim by simply juxtaposing quotes from Cather’s

novels with statements by various blues musicians (almost all African Americans) describing the blues as an art form that emphasizes survival through hardship (290). On the one hand, Cain's essay provides a clear literary-critical precedent for viewing suffering (or rather the endurance of suffering) as an essential theme in Cather's work. On the other hand, his reading of Cather as a "blues artist" gives no consideration to the racial specificity of the suffering that generated the blues as an art form. This is not to suggest that only African Americans can relate to the blues but that not all suffering is the same and that there are historical and socioeconomic stipulations that need to be made in order to argue Cather's status as a blues artist in a nuanced, responsible way. While Cain is correct, then, in observing that suffering and endurance are key themes in Cather's work, in accounting for the appeal of these themes through a universalizing, abstract framework, his essay exemplifies a kind of colorblind (and settler-colonialism-blind) criticism that we can and should be more impatient with. We need critical frameworks that confront rather than obscure the politics of bourgeois whiteness and its settler-colonial contours as we read the themes of suffering and endurance in Cather's writing. What I have tried to suggest in this chapter is that contemporary, white, middle-class readers of Cather's work are likely to respond to her with a "heartfelt sense of connection and esteem" precisely because her novels—without taking this as their explicit agenda—make frontier settlement into a showcase of steadfast humility rather than a series of violently dispossessive invasions and suggest, in the process, that "all lives suffer" (to put it idiomatically, for 2020): that white people suffer, too, and have prospered over time because of their disciplined capacity to endure hardship.

I want to reiterate, lastly, the importance of seemingly race-neutral, economically coded virtues to this reading of Cather's fiction. On the one hand, I have suggested, very broadly, that the more or less complete erasure of histories of indigenous dispossession is one way—the most straightforward way—in which Cather's texts enact settler moves to innocence, mitigating any sense of guilt or responsibility for settler-colonial violence. On the other hand, I have argued more specifically that Cather's moves to innocence go one step further in turning the frontier into a theater for the display, by white people, of economic and moral virtues like principled idealism, the capacity to endure hardship, and an anti-materialistic disinterestedness in the accumulation of property and capital. Cather's emphasis on these moral and economic virtues and her recourse to them as criteria for drawing implicit contrasts between different classes of “good” and “bad” white people are the basis of this chapter's connection to those that have preceded it and to this entire project's larger relevance to the racial politics of our contemporary moment. As I noted in the Introduction to this dissertation, the chapters of this project differ in the extent to which the stakes of their literary analyses can be exemplified in a discrete institution or discourse operative under neoliberalism, and while this discussion of Cather is the weakest in this regard, I do want to end by gesturing toward one way in which the racial and settler-colonial dynamics identified in Cather's work seem to be echoing throughout the landscape of contemporary politics.

Unlike the cases of Rhys, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald, where discussions of work-enforcing welfare reforms, contemporary invocations of white debt, and notions of professionalism served to illustrate the stakes of the readings at hand, I would argue that the neoliberal connection, in Cather's case, is best demonstrated not through the example

of a particular neoliberal discourse but through the discourses arising from America's progressive, Democratic left as responses *to* neoliberalism. In the lead-up to the 2020 presidential primaries, progressive candidates in the Democratic Party like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren pitched themselves as warriors against plutocracy, people who are going to take on corruption in "Washington" and "Wall Street" and make this country work for everyone and not just the rich. Oftentimes, such rhetoric includes explicit contrasts between the urban corruption of Washington or Wall Street and the forgotten laborers and small-business owners of America's heartland. A 2019 policy statement posted online by Elizabeth Warren's campaign begins with the sentence, "For generations, America's family farmers have passed down a tradition of hard work and independence" (Team Warren, "Leveling the Playing Field for America's Family Farmers"). "Today a farmer can work hard, do everything right," the statement proceeds, "and still not make it. It's not because farmers today are any less resilient, enterprising, or committed than their parents or grandparents were. *It's because bad decisions in Washington have consistently favored the interests of multinational corporations and big business lobbyists over the interests of family farmers*" (original emphasis). The claims being made here are of course true, yet the danger of this rhetoric is its construction of America's farmers as the only or the chief victims of the political and economic decisions of a U.S. government controlled by the wealthy. In this staging of the conflict between Washington and family farms, the question of how America's farming families came to own their land in the first place is a non-factor. One is reminded of Tuck and Yang's own example of settler moves to innocence from the Democratic far left, where the Occupy Movement's calls for a redistribution of wealth do not entail a redistribution of land (23-

26). There is also, within these lines from the Warren campaign, a good deal of virtue signaling, specifically regarding virtues that echo those we have seen as markers of whiteness in this chapter and in others throughout this dissertation (“resilien[ce],” commitment, “hard work and independence”). Obviously, family farmers in America are not exclusively white, but the patriotically charged heartland of the rural Midwest, where many of these family farms are located, is an extremely white region, and there is thus something in the Warren campaign lines that romanticizes the rustic resilience of “good” white farmers in contrast to the corruption and greed of “bad” white, Trump-led Washington. Again, this connection need not be pressed too far. The racial work Cather manages to accomplish through her emphasis on the pioneers’ striking array of seemingly race-neutral economic virtues (“something that spoke of race”) is evidence enough, I believe, of the relevance of this chapter’s readings to the colorblind dynamics of neoliberal white supremacy. But I hope this glimpse into some of the predominant discourses being marshaled *against* neoliberalism today—along with the examples of contemporary academic and non-academic writing about Cather’s oeuvre and legacy—helps to reinforce the importance and timeliness of reading the intra-racially expressed racial and settler-colonial elements of her fiction.

## EPILOGUE

The preceding four chapters have sought to illuminate entirely new racial dimensions of white-authored texts that appear, on the surface, racially unremarkable. I want to bring this dissertation to a close by reflecting on what the fields of modernist literary studies and critical whiteness studies might look like after metabolizing the interventions I have offered in this project. In regard to whiteness studies, these reflections are fairly brief. I simply want to reiterate that I hope this dissertation encourages a sharper awareness of whiteness' less spectacular, more intra-racial forms, its diffuse, quotidian manifestations in the behaviors and habits of mind that inform white people's self-perception and social bearing even when people of color are absent and race is not a topic of thought or conversation. I hope that scholars across the disciplines in whiteness studies will supplement (but not replace) analyses of white supremacy's more stark and direct manifestations with consideration of its subtler, more oblique forms, registering its myriad gradations and leaving it nowhere to hide.

In terms of what "Scattered Supremacies" means for reading literary modernism, I hope this dissertation spurs more treatments of race in modernist writing that reflect the insights and imperatives of our historical moment. This need *not* mean, to be clear, more scholarship that connects the cultural and economic discourses informing modernist literary production to those of neoliberalism, specifically, nor does it necessarily mean being more "presentist" in the way we read literature, generally (always making the upshot of one's discussion about how a text can speak to our contemporary present). What it means is making consistent efforts to incorporate into our literary criticism the

lessons we have learned in the past few decades about how white supremacy relies upon whiteness' ability to remain an unmarked, invisible racial category. Scholarship does not happen in a historical vacuum. People are talking about whiteness in America now more than ever, insisting upon the end of its status as an uninterrogated norm. To reflect that historical development within our scholarship means keeping whiteness perpetually on the table as a pertinent topic of consideration—*especially* in those texts where it is least apparent: texts by and about white people whose plotlines and themes do not themselves call attention to questions of racial identity. One could certainly do this in a way that stays entirely within the historical realm of the text in question, leaving aside arguments about parallels or resonances between the forms and contexts of whiteness in the early twentieth century and the early twenty-first. What is important is not the discovery of such presentist connections but the inculcation of a new racial sensorium, one in which literary scholars are always inquisitive and wary about whiteness' historically specific and often ambient, ghostly operations, regardless of the period or type of literature being studied.

Over the course of this dissertation, I found myself wondering many times: am I making these texts about something they are not? If I am, where does this method of reading race stop? Is "Scattered Supremacies" suggesting that *any* reading of a white-authored literary text focusing on white characters that does not substantially discuss the text's whiteness is an irresponsible, "bad" reading? The answer to the first of these questions is yes, and it would be dishonest and self-defeating for me to claim otherwise. The whole point of my archival selections was that the texts I have written about are *not* "about" whiteness or race in any prominent, straightforward sense. But just because *The*

*Mansion or Tender is the Night* or *Shadows on the Rock* was not *designed* as a cultural commentary on white identity does not mean it is ever untouched by the racial biases of its author. I have made these texts “about” whiteness in the sense, merely, of bringing something out that was always already there, not of imposing upon them a rubric or category that is foreign and irrelevant to them.

The second question brings us to matters of vagueness and specificity. Where does this approach to race stop? When is it *not* very helpful to make whiteness the focus of analysis when discussing a racially un-self-conscious, white-authored text about white characters? I think the question here becomes, in turn, whether an analysis can glean from the text an understanding of whiteness more specific than simply saying, “These characters are ‘privileged.’ They have the luxury of not having to think about race as a factor in their lives because it does not affect them negatively in any way.” This is an entirely accurate description and fair critique of a lot of white characters in a lot of texts, but it is also, of course, like shooting fish in barrel. It is such a broad condemnation that it does not invite follow-up conversation so much as shut conversation down. What I have tried to do throughout “Scattered Supremacies” is generate readings of whiteness that are textured and specific, readings that go beyond fair but uninformative call outs of general “ignorance” or “privilege” and call fellow scholars *in* to conversations about specific behavioral tendencies, structures of feeling, vocabularies, and habits of mind that serve as underexamined vehicles of (often unwitting) white supremacy. I have tried, that is, to avoid vilifying these texts and authors and to find *value* in them, instead, because (whether they intended to or not) they help to break whiteness down in revealing ways and visualize its component parts.



And the answer to the last question, then, is no: this dissertation does not mean to suggest that any reading of a white-authored literary text lacking a robust discussion of whiteness is bad or problematic. Sometimes a white-populated text just does not give one much to chew on, race-wise, other than the fact that its characters are white and living their privileged, (at least racially) carefree lives—one cannot figure out, that is, anything coherent and specific to say about how the plot lines, themes, or stylistic features of the text amount to a more nuanced, sustained white racial discourse. That is fine (and if one critic cannot find anything of that sort, maybe someone else, coming at the text from a different angle, will). Race does not need to be a major topic of analysis in every good reading of a white-authored literary text. Whatever the major topics of their reading are, however, I do hope that “Scattered Supremacies” will encourage literary critics working on white-authored, white-centered texts to always ask themselves, at *some* point in their analysis, how whiteness might inform the discourses and textual dynamics on which they *are* focusing, “especially in situations where ‘race’ is not ostensibly present” (Hartigan, *Racial Situations* 286). Asking this question may lead only to a footnote or possibly even to nothing, but having the diligence always at least to ask it (particularly in the case of texts devoid of interracial conflict, troubling depictions of people of color, and other forms of starkly racial content that usually prompt us to think about the whiteness of a character or author) does not seem like a very large ask for literary critics. It is a big part, I think, of what it would mean for modernist studies and literary studies more generally to metabolize this dissertation’s insights.

Regarding those insights, I want to add two clarifications about this project’s more theoretical contributions to the study not just of whiteness but of race in general. I

have talked, throughout “Scattered Supremacies,” about reading whiteness in texts where race appears to be absent. Obviously, each chapter of the dissertation has shown that race is not in fact absent from any of these texts, for whiteness courses through them like blood, even if it is hidden beneath the surface. It is also not really true, however, that blackness (or Asian-ness or indigeneity) is absent from these texts either. Race is relational. So long as racial differences are used to perpetuate and justify hierarchical social structures, whiteness will always be inconceivable without blackness, Asian-ness, Latinx-ness, “Indian”-ness—all the things it is not. It is thus not quite right to say that blackness is “absent” in *Good Morning, Midnight* or *The Mansion*. We would do better to say that blackness, in these texts, is a ghostly presence: it haunts the margins, always *implied* (however tacitly) where the white bourgeoisie affirms its own immaculate discipline and work ethic. As I pointed out occasionally—through references, say, to the story of the Martiniquan woman in *Midnight* or the figure of Old Het in *The Mansion*—there are fleeting passages when blackness explicitly appears in these texts, yet this does not mean that the texts only “become” racial in those brief moments. The texts are always racialized, through the economically coded operations and performances of whiteness that pervade them. What I am trying to clarify here is that it is not even so much blackness that is absent from the text so much as *characters of color*, for everywhere that whiteness is present, blackness is insinuated. It is important to point this out because so much of what “Scattered Supremacies” aims to do is tear down the ideological veil that makes whiteness seem like an innocent, self-enclosed, universal trait: like something that does *not* always exist in hierarchical relation to other racial identities. In illuminating how whiteness can manifest in seemingly non-racial forms and situations, “Scattered

Supremacies” does not argue that whiteness is non-relational, that it can have meaning without understandings of blackness or Asian-ness or “Indian”-ness. It argues, rather, that whiteness’ relationality does not always take the form of overt juxtaposition, of being explicitly set against non-white bodies or against objects, practices, or aesthetic forms from non-European cultures.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this clarification about the relationality of race and whiteness, I also want to note the emphasis that “Scattered Supremacies” places on race’s intersections with other axes of identity. In most societies, and certainly within the United States, race shapes *all* of our social relationships and positionings. To analyze whiteness in the way this dissertation has analyzed it is to remind ourselves that *other* aspects of identity, such as class, gender, and nationality, are incompletely addressed insofar as we do not consider how they are always racialized.<sup>2</sup> This is worth underscoring as a theoretical takeaway given how much of the existing scholarship on the authors in this study overlooks the racialization of white gender and class identities: the way that race is thoroughly discussed in criticism on *Wide Sargasso Sea* but not *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* or *Good Morning, Midnight*, the way it is addressed in readings of *Light in August* and *Absalom! Absalom!* but not the Snopes Trilogy.

Without it devolving into a kind of whiteness witch hunt—where critics put on trial every white author in the canon and churn out condemnatory accounts of their texts’ racial biases—a thorough uptake of this dissertation’s interventions could result in something like a series of “inventories” being taken of various, canonical white writers,

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Ania Loomba for bringing this clarification about the dissertation’s argument to my attention. In a revised version of this project, this insight would be threaded back into the Introduction and individual chapters rather than just added in here as a coda.

<sup>2</sup> Again, I am indebted to Ania Loomba for identifying and helping me to phrase this point.

where scholars revisit some of the authors or texts that no one has ever really talked about in terms of race (because there was not anything obviously racial to talk about) and reconsider, in light of studies like this one, whether there are in fact dimensions of this or that novel or story that are more racialized than scholars have previously acknowledged. Part of what makes the thought of such “inventories” so exciting is that they could lead to discoveries that are especially fruitful for teaching. Indeed, the classroom is another area, aside from the academic press, that I hope “Scattered Supremacies” is able to touch. The very first draft of this dissertation’s Introduction began with an anecdote about how I was able to go through four years of literary studies to get a Bachelor’s degree in English at an Ivy League institution and can only remember having *one* conversation, in all four of those years, about race in a text that was *not* authored by a person of color. Certainly, there were plenty of classes where race would have been a more constant topic of analysis, and I do wish, now, that I had taken more courses, say, in African American or Asian American literature. But the very fact that I had to have taken those courses for race to be placed on my literary radar is a symptom of the blinkered racial optics this dissertation seeks to address. In broadening the way that fellow scholars think about whiteness in literature, I hope that “Scattered Supremacies” helps to make it impossible for future generations of undergraduates to have the same experience (or non-experience) of racially minded literary analysis that I had.

Indeed, the insights of this dissertation are especially valuable to contemporary efforts at creating more equitable and inclusive classrooms. I think there is a lot of consternation about what calls for diversifying syllabi mean for the long-standing canon of proverbial “dead white men.” The canonical clout of these authors (along with just the

realpolitik of social change and educational reform) means that they are unlikely to disappear from the classroom completely, but what “Scattered Supremacies” makes clear is that there are ways of engaging with Cather or Fitzgerald that do not have to mean *avoiding* discussions of race (which seems, to me, like one of the main, tacit misgivings about teaching the dead white canon). In fact, however, bringing race to the forefront of classroom conversations about seemingly race-neutral, white-authored texts is a key part of enacting our pedagogical commitments to inclusion and diversity. It is absolutely crucial that we diversify our syllabi by including more writers of color, but the racial biases of the status quo will still haunt the classroom if our discussions of race are confined to the days or weeks we are teaching a black- or Asian- or Latinx- or indigenous-authored text then drop out of the picture when we turn to white writing. The insights and methods of this dissertation can help to chip away at these ingrained patterns.

This project leaves behind so much unfinished business. The readings in some of these chapters (particularly those on Faulkner and Fitzgerald) could have delved a bit more deeply into the how the formal mechanics of some of these novels structure the manifestations of whiteness being uncovered. There is more to be said, too, about the national contours of “American” versus “British” whiteness as these categories are exhibited in geographically disparate modernist texts. It is also especially interesting to think about how movements and time periods of literature other than modernism have internalized and refracted the cultural scripts of whiteness dominant in their time. What might a Romantic novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne or a Naturalist one by Frank Norris show us about whiteness (in the mid or late nineteenth century, *if* also, possibly, the early

twenty-first) that a modernist novel does not? Ultimately, what I find the most exciting about this project (and what I hope readers find exciting about it as well) is that thinking about whiteness in this more expansive way has the potential to defamiliarize entire swathes of the Anglo-American literary canon, to make entirely new archives out of long-standing literary texts. The prospect of discovering unrecognized racial dimensions to their content and form is exciting in itself, but as I have tried to suggest in this dissertation's occasional nods to colorblind white supremacy under neoliberalism, this expanded eye and ear for whiteness' less flagrant, direct manifestations is not just intellectually exciting but politically critical. As I noted in the Introduction, the influence of the Trump administration does not mean the end of more subtle, indirect, "colorblind" forms of white racial dominance but merely the resurgence of older, more blunt types of white supremacy alongside these ongoing, more insidious forms. The past few months of 2020, particularly since the murder of George Floyd, have witnessed a heartening upsurge of protests against anti-blackness in the United States. Unfortunately, they have also witnessed an upsurge of emotional and educational labor on behalf of black people trying to explain and correct the problematic forms of allyship to which they are being exposed as more and more white people try (well-meaningly but clumsily) to understand and do something about their own whiteness. The situation is only exacerbated by the fact that President Trump and his supporters have given "good" white liberals an easy scapegoat of "bad" white racists to point to as the real problem. The time for white people to become better, more thorough critics of themselves, in other words, is now. Hopefully, in making us better critics of whiteness in literature, "Scattered Supremacies" can play a small part in making us better critics of whiteness in life.

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